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O Carnavalesco em Contos Escolhidos de Deborah Eisenberg e Wells Tower

The Carnivalesque in Selected Short Stories by Deborah Eisenberg and Wells Tower

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I dedicate this text to all my professors who helped me get through all these years in English studies.

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palavras-chave

carnavalesco, narrativa breve, Mikhail Bakhtin, dialogismo, polifonia, heteroglossia, menipeia, novela, épico, grotesco, discurso, pârodia

Resumo

Esta dissertação analisa a aplicação do conceito do carnavalesco em termos de aspectos formais e temáticos às obras de dois importantes escritores de contos norteamericanos, Deborah Eisenberg e Wells Tower. Enquanto as narrativas de Tower apresentam o uso de “billingsgate”, e outras características grotescas, bem como as inversões de paródia, ironia e também humor negro, o clima carnavalesco bakhtiniano que pressuponha uma celebração festiva que supostamente confronta a cultura dominante está ausente. Deborah Eisenberg, por outro lado, engloba bem o aspecto dialógico, polifónico e heteroglóssico das teorias bakhtinianas, com interessantes inversões paródicas. No entanto, mesmo as suas narrativas não podem ser designadas como carnavalescas, pelo menos não no verdadeiro sentido do termo bakhtiniano. A análise realizada revela que a análise destas narrativas breves e contemporâneas seguindo uma perspectiva estritamente bakhtiniana do carnavalesco é impossível, e embora dê frutos em alguns aspectos, a reavaliação de alguns princípios básicos de Bakhtin é necessária para atender às exigências desencantadas dos tempos modernos.

Keywords carnivalesque, short stories, Mikhail Bakhtin, dialogism, polyphony, heteroglossia, menippea, novel, epic, grotesque, discourse, parody.

Abstract

The dissertation deals with contemporary American short stories and the analysis of the application of the concept of the carnivalesque to both formal and thematic aspects in the works of two prominent American short story writers Deborah Eisenberg and Wells Tower. While Tower´s stories show billingsgate and grotesque features, as well as parodic and ironic inversions and dark humour, the Bakhtinian carnivalesque atmosphere of festive celebration that counters the dominant culture is lost. Deborah Eisenberg on the other hand encompasses well the dialogic, polyphonic and heteroglossic aspect present in Bakhtin's theories, with interesting parodic inversions. However, even her stories cannot be termed as carnivalesque, at least not in the truly Bakhtinian sense of the word. The analysis conducted therefore reveals that analyzing these contemporary short stories following a strictly Bakhtinian perspective of the carnivalesque is impossible, and although it bears fruit in some aspects, the reevaluation of some of Bakhtin´s basic principles is needed to suit the disenchanted requirements of modern times.

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1. Introduction. The Interdisciplinary Nature of Bakhtin's Theories

> *Whatever a story is, however it behaves, the important thing is what it reveals. It's a magnifying glass for examining the techniques of impressionism, say, or the assumptions of postmodernism, or the social data caught in its prism. Famously associated with "submerged populations" and the "lonely voice" of the individual, the short story is the window on marginalized identities. ....The story is viewed as a cultural diorama* (2).
>
> Susan Lohafer

Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theories have always attracted the attention of literary critics. In part, the fact that his theories focus on universality rather than individuality, and contextual meaning rather than meaning outside context, has earned them great popularity. While his concepts of heteroglossia, polyphony, dialogism, or the carnivalesque have been mainly used in order to aid the thorough analysis of certain longer works of fiction, it is intriguing that the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin has not been widely applied to short stories.

> The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogised). These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization—this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* 263)

Furthermore, in "Epic and Novel", Bakhtin compared and contrasted the novel with the epic. The epic is for Bakhtin characterized by patriotism, national tradition and absolute autonomy, whereas the novel is dynamic and flexible with formal and thematic range. As Jakob Lothe says in an essay "Conrad's *Lord Jim* and the Fragment: narrative, genre, history": "Elasticity and versatility, which contribute to and yet complicate definitions of the novel, derive in part from its tendency to exploit and incorporate elements of other genres into its own"(17). However, Bakhtin never established any distinction between a

short story and a novel. Since the formal characteristics of the short story genre are quite blurred and there seems to be no agreement on what a short story should include, it is easy to see how the short story relates formally to the novel. Several of Bakhtin's points about the novel could be made about the modern short story. If we are to compare the modern short story with a contemporary novel we might observe that the short story tries to incorporate elements of other genres as its own, just as the novel usually does. Lothe argues that: "Like the modern novel, the modern short story also exploits not just one subgenre but aspects of several, and the manner in which it combines these elements serves cumulatively to enhance their structural and thematic significance" ("Aspects of the Fragments in Joyce's *Dubliners* and Kafka's *The Trial*", 97). Moreover, in "Discourse in the Novel", Bakhtin defines the novel as, "a diversity of social speech types [...] and a diversity of individual voices, drastically organized" (262). This kind of a definition can be applied to short stories as well, or more precisely the collections of stories by Deborah Eisenberg and Wells Tower if we presume that these stories are loosely structured wholes, capturing a diversity of American polyphonic voices, rather than representing a single American voice, within which separate stories enter into, what Bakhtin calls a "novelistic discourse" ("Discourse in the Novel", 261)

One reason for applying Bakhtin's literary theory to short stories is that both the novel and short stories are narratives and the borderline between a long and a short narrative, as Lothe says, is problematically unclear ("Aspects of Fragments in Joyce's *Dubliners* and Kafka's *The Trial*", 97). So what difference would it make to apply the theory to the novel or to the short story? Furthermore, although Bakhtin does find the novel to be the primary source for his analysis it seems he is quite limited when it comes to his research by his using only the works of Dostoevsky. Should such an approach suggest the theory's limitedness or should it be a challenge to study other novel like genres? Lothe wonders thus, whether when reading a modern narrative one is exclusively reading the modern novel (97).

Interestingly, Bakhtin's approach has been used to clarify not only the operations of the novel, but also many aspects of poetry creation and interpretation. In an article, "The Verse Novel: A Modern American Poetic Genre" written for *College English*, Patrick D. Murphy writes that just as modern prose can, so can modern poetics present a story which is narrated from multiple points of view by means of changing narrators, basically by

letting the characters advance the "narrated event" through their own speech and actions (58). Furthermore, Murphy argues that Bakhtin's concept of dialogue, or double–voiced discourse, can apply to poetry as well as to modern prose: "The advancement of the poetic fiction's plot often occurs through dramatic action—dialogue, soliloquies, and character behaviour–rather than through traditional narrative discourse (Hemingway's style versus Hawthorne's in the short story; Patricia Hampel's "Resort" versus Wordsworth's *The Prelude* in autobiographical long poems)" (61). Murphy feels that the functions such as literary allusion in a poem, words, passages etc. may be seen as double–voiced discourse because, "not only do they make explicit reference to extra textual utterances known to the author, but they also serve as a comment on, or reply to, these other literary works" (61).

Another reason for applying Bakhtin's theories to poems may lay in the fact that, as Murphy points out, "modern American long poems have become novelized" (63). Bakhtin explains that poems have become more free and flexible, " their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the "novelistic" layers of literary language, they become dialogised, permeated with laughter, irony, humour, elements of self–parody and finally–this is the most important thing–the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic open–endedness, a living contact with un–finished, still–evolving contemporary reality (the open–ended present)" (*Dialogic Imagination*, 6–7). This basically means that the new novelized poems are freed from the restraints of traditional, historical genre requirements. V. V. Ivanov refers to this new freedom as "The prosaization of poetry in the twentieth century that enables the advancing of dialogic relationships into the fore–ground" (199–200). In both forms, the reader becomes a participant in dialogue rather than merely a recipient of information.

Somehow, then, the short story has not received much attention when it comes to Bakhtin, nor has it been explored in great detail in the light of his literary criticism. One major exceptions is Dominic Head's *The Modernist Short Story*. Head argues that Bakhtin would probably classify the short story, along with poetry, as monologic, since the "formal properties" of short stories are analogous with poetry: "The frame story, the single action, the simple plot reversal–which are familiar derives in the well–plotted, unified story, and which tend to invite a monologic governing narrative discourse, conscious of the controlling structure and so more clearly directed than the discourse of the novel" (96). Head contrasts this position with the dialogic approach to the modernist short story. In his

view, the modern short story "incorporates disunifying devices which are seminal features of the literary effects produced in the genre at a time when the theory and criticism of literature has achieved an extraordinary level of complexity and specialization" (x). Head states in *The Modernist Short Story* that "it is curious to find a major literary genre – the modern short story – that has not been subjected to the systematic attentions of literary theory" (p.x). In contrast to the developed form and characteristics of a short story which creates a "static notion of the genre's unity – its supposed reliance on certain unifying devices, such as a single event, straightforward characterization, a coherent |moment of revelation – from which an easily identifiable |point can be recognized" (2), Head argues instead that short stories incorporate "disunifying devices which are seminal features of the literary effects produced in the genre […] and that the short story encapsulates the essence of literary modernism, and has an enduring ability to capture the episodic nature of twentieth–century experience" (37). Using the framework of Bakhtin and Althusser, Head developed his own "theoretical frame" to account for "the formal and narrative disruptions discoverable in the short story" and to reveal the "connection between literary form and social context" (1). According to Brian Shaffer, who reviewed Head's book, by questioning traditional approaches to the short story (Edgar Allan Poe's single effect doctrine) and analyzing many canonical, modernist short stories written by Katherine Mansfield, Joyce, Woolf etc., Head reveals how "modernist stories derive from a tension between formal convention and formal disruption; that Joyce subverts the single–effect story in delineating his ambiguous internal dramas; that Woolf repudiates an ordered approach to fiction and the hierarchical world–view it embodies and that Mansfield abandons "stable symbolism" in order to reject a fixed social hierarchy" (134–136).

Theories on short stories are in general relatively sparse, not just when it comes to Bakhtin's theory, but also when we compare the research carried out on the novel. That is when it becomes even clearer that there is yet a great deal about the short story to discover. For instance, the definition of the term "short story" in the field of short story criticism still has not been agreed upon. Many attempts at defining the genre were made during the reinvention of literary criticism in the twentieth century. However, no accepted definition of a short story has been achieved. Ian Reid comments on the fact that, due to the several influences on the short story genre, the varieties of short stories have emerged over time and made it nearly impossible to find a good definition. Reid stresses that "adequate

working definitions are nevertheless possible and helpful provided one recognizes that they must refer to predominant norms rather than all–inclusive categories" (4). Whereas well–know short story critics like Charles May and Mary Rohrberger first make assumptions about the short stories and then search for works to find evidence for their assumptions, Norman Friedman tries to find out how the definition can fit the existing evidence. He further argues that short story is "a short fictional narrative in prose" and that basically, short story contains everything short that when read seems to be like a story (29). Austin Wright points out that some categorization is however necessary if we want to discover something more about the short story genre ("On Defining the Short Story: The Genre Question", 46). He distinguishes some "tendencies" of the short story genre that serve as a good basis for realizing what this genre is and distinguishing it from novel and novella. According to Wright, the short story demonstrates the length between five hundred words and the length of James Joyce's "The Dead" (approx.15500 words); it deals with characters and action in a fictional world, and the action is quite simple. Short stories, as Wright writes, should however be unified and intense, with plots emphasizing that intensity (52).

When it comes on the use of Bakhtin's concepts in postmodern literature, Linda Hutcheon concludes that "fictional narrative forms today are, in fact, a very extreme and self–conscious version of the novel as defined by Bakhtin. And this is true even within the limitations of Bakhtin's very selective notion of the genre as parodic, self–reflexive and non–monologic" ("The Carnivalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Pop Culture and the Erotic", 84). She feels that the irony, the grotesque and the parody that Bakhtin described are among the most recognizable aspects of postmodernism and postmodern literary works.

These and other carnivalesque features as described by Bakhtin have indeed been seen as be an indispensable instrument in analyzing the relationship between the high and the low in contemporary culture. Hutcheon feels that the carnivalesque culture, which Bakhtin sees as a protest against the high in the society, and which is created by "popular–festive" forms which allowed temporary respite, in the shape of temporally restricted, legalized transgressions of social and literary norms, is today called "pop" culture ("The Carnivalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Pop Culture and the Erotic", 85) and should be analyzed in all forms that include the "pop".

Furthermore, Ted Hiebert also notices that the carnival is no longer seen as a medieval subversion of everyday social life, but rather represents a model for postmodern

parodic performance of identity itself (113). The carnivalesque concept applied to short stories by Wells Tower and Deborah Eisenberg will hypothetically examine the very status of Bakhtin's carnivalesque in contemporary American short stories, and by analysing its basic principles, it will further enable the realization of the connections between the social circumstances in contemporary America and the world created in the short stories as seen and felt by their authors. Since Bakhtin stressed the realistic side of the novel, so will I in this analysis, among other things, stress the realistic aspect of these stories as protest against current social and political circumstances in a Kafkaesque American world.

1.1 Methodology and Organization

The first, second and the third chapter of this thesis provide a conceptual presentation of the theories of Bakhtin as they apply to the carnivalesque and an examination of the Bakhtinian paradigms of the carnivalesque, polyphony and heteroglossia. They further employ an inquiry into the American short story tradition and its relation to Bakhtinian concepts. Chapters four, and five contain an application of the various paradigms such as heteroglossia, polyphony and dialogism to the stories of Wells Tower and Deborah Eisenberg in order to establish the correlations with the carnivalesque and to provide the basis for the analysis of the carnivalesque features such as billingsgate language, parody, grotesque realism, carnival laughter, violence and other rituals of carnival as they appear in the selected short stories by Deborah Eisenberg and Wells Tower. The process of analysis involves taking a set of stories and first analyzing the structure of the stories in terms of polyphony and dialogism, therefore supporting the Bakhtinian hypothesis that the carnivalesque is created through polyphony, heteroglossia and dialogism, but also supporting the hypothesis that the humour and parody that the carnivalesque expresses are encompassed in the words the characters use as a means of conversation as well as in the dialogues and situations they create.

The investigation will encompass selected stories from the following short story collections:

Wells Tower: *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned* (2009)

Deborah Eisenberg: *Twilight of the Superheroes* (2006)

These two collections represent what might be called 21st century short stories. As

stated before, my main objective is to investigate to what extent can the carnivalesque be detected, both in form and meaning, in selected short stories, and what is its significance for the stories and the intentions of the authors. Although selected stories will be analyzed individually, the end result will refer to the collections as a whole. The stories analyzed comprise cycles, and therefore, it is inappropriate to observe them separately, detached from the whole.

Through the examination of the reduction or subversion of the implied authors' assumptions, I basically want to explore narratorial intimacy in short stories, and therefore the status of the author, through Bakhtin's technique of double–voiced discourse, whereby the author uses another's speech in another's language to express authorial intentions. This is part of Bakhtin's basic premise that discourse is always the product of a personality, a speaking subject, in a context. Therefore, the analysis attempts to explore the author's role in selected short stories by implementing polyphony and dialogism, which are central concepts in creating the carnivalesque element or effect.

Bakhtin bases the carnivalesque upon a somewhat idealized conception of folk culture by rooting the carnivalesque in the anarchic folk festivals of the Medieval and the Renaissance periods. During these festivals, the collective power of the common folk of society is set free in an almost Bacchanalian revel during which "all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (*Rabelais and His World*, 72) are suspended. The notion of what it means to be carnivalesque however has changed over time and has taken on different interpretations. For Stam:

> The carnivalesque principle abolishes hierarchies, levels social classes, and creates another life free from conventional rules and restrictions. In carnival, all that is marginalized and excluded—the mad, the scandalous, and the aleatory—takes over the center in a liberating explosion of otherness. The principle of material body—hunger, thirst, defecation, copulation—becomes a positively corrosive force, and festive laughter enjoys a symbolic victory over death, over all that is held sacred, over all that oppresses and restricts (86).

For Turner then again, these rituals and celebrations are characterized by their "liminality":

> Lying at the threshold betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial. In them, hierarchies are temporarily inverted and normal codes of behaviour suspended. Although such events may be calendrical or cyclical in nature, they can also erupt during times when those

> superiors are perceived to have so disrupted the balance between society and nature that disturbances in the former have provoked imbalances in the latter (95–168).

Despite the changes in emphasis and different applications of the carnivalesque, the basic notion of what it means for a work of literature has stayed the same. In fiction, the carnivalesque element is a decentralizing force that has the purpose of invading the central authority of the work and inverting the hierarchy within it. As Bakhtin puts it: "Carnival is not substantive, it is functional. Its aim is to achieve a joyful relativity of everything" (*Rabelais and His World*, 123). Polyphony and dialogism help deconstruct the authority of the writer and enable the creation of the carnivalesque effect. Polyphony, as a form of writing according to Bakhtin, basically implies that there is no omniscient–all knowing narrator; that the narrator shares a "surplus of visions" in relation to the hero. In polyphonic novels, narrators or authors shape the characters as much as they shape the authors, and authors discover the characters in their direct confrontation, in the form of the dialogue, with the characters they employ in their works. By placing themselves on the same level as their heroes, authors know about them at any given moment no more than it would be possible for the heroes themselves to know.

Critics, such as Roland Barthes, believe that this polyphony represents the "death" of the author and the birth of the reader. The author is, then, no longer the "father" of the work, dictating its meaning, but simply another character, another voice in the polyphony, "another figure sewn into the rug; his signature is no longer privileged and paternal, the locus of genuine truth, but rather, lucid" (78). "He becomes a 'paper author'... The author no longer explains or judges his characters, or tries to fit them into some moral framework, but merely presents them and lets them speak for themselves" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 5). In this dissertation, polyphonic structures of selected stories will be addressed, but mainly when discussing the creation of the carnivalesque itself. The problematics of the authors and their collective memory, vs. the characters and their emergent stories, will be investigated within the selected stories and polyphony will serve the purpose of clarifying the differences between authorial speech and speech of other participants in the selected stories.

Dialogism, a term that has been widely used by Bakhtin's followers, is a related term to carnivalization. They complement each other. While carnivalization, or the notion of the

carnivalesque, stands for the voices of the margin that invade the center and claim an equal, dialogic status, challenge authority, turn the world upside down, playing, testing and moderating the truth, dialogism "is not a means for revealing, for bringing to the surface the already ready–made character of a person; no, in dialogue/dialogism a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is, not only for others but for himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 252). In Bakhtin's "dialogic" nature of the novel, the author has an opinion, but does not claim to be in possession of the truth about characters. The author and the character engage in a dialogue through the technique of double–voiced discourse, which is not resolved within the text itself. This aims to shed light on the dialogic strategies used in the selected stories for the purpose, again, of creating the carnivalesque effect as well as for the purpose of commenting on the position of the author within the short story genre. The creation of the carnivalesque, its application and use, whether intentional or unintentional, will then become clearer.

Whereas polyphony, heteroglossia and dialogism stand for the formal characteristics of the carnivalesque, which will be categorized as the displacement of hierarchy, other concepts have been introduced into the debate, such as grotesque realism, encompassing carnival laughter–parodic laughter, aggression and violence and parody which are the direct reflection of the carnivalesque effect in literature and which I also intend to explore in the selected stories.

Grotesque realism is a particular type of aesthetic that Bakhtin developed along with the revolution that is caused by the ordinary folk in which, "the bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable" (*Rabelais and His World*, 19). What the carnivalesque grotesque often includes is something Bakhtin refers to as the body's "lower strata," that is, the biological parts and processes involved in sex, fecundity, and the ingestion, digestion, and elimination of food and drink. One example can be found in the third book of Rabelais where the character Panurge sings the praises of a certain sauce that "set the belly in apple–pie order, so a man could belch, fart, poop, piddle, shit, sneeze, sob, cough, throw up, yawn…" In a literary context, as defined in *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, grotesque is "most commonly employed to denote the ridiculous, bizarre, extravagant, freakish and unnatural; in short, aberrations from the desirable norms of harmony, balance, and proportion" (367). According to Mikhail Bakhtin, however, such

a definition reduces the grotesque to mere satire; instead, he puts his emphasis on the grotesque's cathartic effect resulting in regeneration, which then becomes the distinctive mark of the grotesque in comparison with the burlesque.

This aesthetic of the carnivalesque–grotesque Bakhtin, in Grant Stirling's words, talks about "mirrors the structural ambivalence of the carnivalesque and is a fundamentally destabilizing transgressive aesthetic" (45). The grotesque represents the activities of the folk who, as Michael Holquist suggests, are full of life, carnal and extreme, vulgar at times: "His folk are blasphemous rather than adoring, cunning rather than intelligent; they are coarse, dirty, and rampantly physical, revelling in oceans of strong drink, poods of sausage, and endless coupling of bodies" (xix). The grotesque is for Bakhtin mostly related to the body's abnormality and deformity: "The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in all their indissoluble unit" (*Rabelais and His World,* 19). This degradation can however be both spiritual and physical. Bakhtin does not explicitly limit the grotesque to the human body, but he does talk of the effects of the distorted body on a human psyche. At this point grotesque can also encompass dark realism, more appropriately for Bakhtin "dark humour", which was the representation of the actions and thoughts of the people who Bakhtin described as enjoying and participating in carnival. It served the purpose of transforming the acts of violence into real spectacles. For Stam: "Carnivalesque art, since it sees its characters not as flesh–and–blood people but as abstract puppet–like figures, laughs at beatings, dismemberment, and even death" (137).

Therefore, it is possible to discuss the grotesque in a metaphorical sense as well, concerning the human behaviour or specific situations, moods. The goal here will be to show how the modern grotesque transgresses the limitations of fleshliness and becomes the subject of the world characters inhabit. Grotesque realism as something distorted, unnatural, abnormal and hideous can also refer to the situations that the characters, which populate these stories find themselves helplessly wandering in.

When discussing parody in correlation to Bakhtin it is important to note that the concept of parody, which Bakhtin saw as a central force of the medieval carnival as chaotic, subversive play with and against the dominant language forms in order to eliberate

the mind and the spirit and get rid of the restraints set upon the people, is not a simple form of mimicry as seen today. Bakhtin believes that the language we use today differs from the official, authoritative language of the past, "the complex and multi–leveled hierarchy of discourses, forms, images, styles that used to permeate the entire system of official language and linguistic consciousness was swept away by the linguistic revolutions of the Renaissance" and that the parody in modern times is an impoverished version of a parody "narrow and unproductive" (*Rabelais and His World*, 43) In contrast to such parody, the earlier kind of parody Bakhtin talks about in his works is liberating. Namely, it allows possibilities of growth on the part of the characters and their change. Parody surfaces as some sort of a creative potential. It is characterized by parodic situations which Bakhtin called "intentional dialogized hybrids" ("From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse", 76). Such parodic situations were created when authors distanced themselves from any authoritative style so that a new point of view could be brought to the topic, which enriched it, stressed its multiple potential, and thereby foregrounded a special role for the creative artist. "Linguistic consicousness...constituted itself outside the direct word...the creating artist began to look at language from outside, with another's eyes, from the point of view of a potentially different language and style (Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 71). Bakhtin never dismisses the existence of authoritative language, he just dismisses its authorial powers. Furthermore, it seems that parody in Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson's words:

> undermines not authority in principle but only authority with pretensions to be timeless and absolute. Parodic forms enable us to distance ourselves from words, to be outside any given utterance and to assume our own unique attitude toward it. Thus, the parodic words we use are important not because they can change reality but because they increase our freedom of interpretive choice by providing new perspectives. (435).

Parody as defined by Bakhtin will, however, be merged with Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodern parody for the better understanding of its purpose and use in contemporary American short stories selected for analysis in this dissertation.

Bakhtin's concepts provide a stimulating tool with which to analyze the voices of American society; that, which creates the carnival and that which tends to suffocate its occurrence and existence. Whatever the differences in character and tendency, the carnival–grotesque form exercises the same function in all types of writing. "The function

of the carnival is to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted" (*Rabelais and His World*, 34). Such aspects of the carnival will be applied in the analysis of the works by Eisenberg and Tower, hopefully helping in discovering the extent of carnivalesque imaging in the selected stories and therefore helping in formulating a more modern vision of the carnivalesque as a literary technique in contemporary American writings.

2. The Carnivalesque and Its Modern Representations

In one of Bakhtin's most influential observations, he claims that early carnival was the reason for the creation of the highly dialogised novel. Carnival enabled the speech of ordinary folk to be liberated and to start communicating with the authoritative speech of the dominant style. Analyzing the concept of the carnival and its connections not just to liberated speech, but most importantly to the laughter of the Middle ages, Bakhtin developed his theory of the carnivalesque, or as some would say, the philosophy of the carnival (Elliot, 129). The theory of the carnival has served many literary critics in their questioning of some of the basic issues in the analysis of society and culture. According to Chris Humphrey, however, it has been most fruitful in the analysis of contemporary culture (99). Bakhtin dealt with carnival and the meaning of the carnivalesque in relation to the creation of the new modern novel in *Rabelais and His World*, written in the 1930s as a dissertation and published in 1962 in Russia, translated into English in 1968. Dealing with the culture of the Middle Ages in *Rabelais and His World,* Bakhtin further gives us a sense of what carnival might signify for culture in general. Rabelais, according to Bakhtin, used strategies that relate his work closely to Menippean satire, and the carnival Bakhtin talks about, not just in this work but other works he published during his lifetime, contains some of the basic characteristics of the Menippean genre. Accordingly, some basic reference to the Menippean satire will be given, mainly by paraphrasing and quoting Bakhtin from his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* as translated and edited by Caryl Emerson.

Bakhtin refers to the menippea as a highly carnivalized genre, flexible and changeable which penetrated deep into European literature and changed it greatly (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 112). Moreover, "The menippea is characterized by an extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 114). There are a few revolutionary characteristics of the menippea, nonetheless, which Bakhtin addresses and which will make his concept of the carnivalesque clearer and thus more relevant for this analysis. Bakhtin writes that one of the most important characteristics of the menippea as a genre is its boldness and the fact that it is unrestrained in the use of the fantastic and adventure its quest to provoke and test the truth. Furthermore, menippea is characterized by its heroes, who are placed to wander in

extraordinary situations precisely with the idea of testing a philosophical concern, a specific truth, rather than the human character in general:

> The testing of a wise man is a test of his philosophical position in the world, not a test of any other features of his character independent of that position. In the menippea there appear abnormal moral and psychic states of man, split personality, daydreaming, passions bordering on madness etc. These provoke eccentric behaviour, scandal scenes, inappropriate speeches and performances; that is, all sorts of violations of the generally accepted and customary course of events and the established norms of behaviour and etiquette, including manners of speech (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 116).

Apart from this, menippea is full of contrasts, rises and falls, ups and downs, unexpected combinings and disuniting of things and most importantly it may often include elements of social utopia, like daydreaming or simply dreaming. Finally, the last characteristic of the menippea, as specified by Bakhtin, is its concern with current and topical issues (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 112–114); "This is, in its own way, the 'journalistic' genre of antiquity acutely echoing the ideological issues of the day" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 112–114). Since the Menippean satire is the basis of Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory, and since it concerns current and topical issues, it serves well in tracing some of these characteristics in works by two contemporary American short story authors, Deborah Eisenberg and Wells Towers, naturally in addition to their relation to the carnivalesque, which, as shown, displays very similar features to the Menippean genre.

In *Rabelais and His World*, carnival is a way of life and a mode of language opposed to the official norms of church and state and is closely connected to concepts such as polyphony and heteroglossia (Morson and Emerson 443–56). As a way of life, it is an expression of universal freedom:

> Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom (*Rabelais and His World*, 7)

Similar to menippea, it the shows characteristics of an unrestrained world, bordering with fantastic and unimaginable elements. As a mode of language, carnival further functions similarly to menippea as an expression of freedom,

> a special type of communication impossible in everyday life with special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times (*Rabelais and His World*, 10).

The people who used such a language "stood on the borderline between life and art in a peculiar mid–zone as it were; they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors" (*Rabelais and His World*, 8). As Menippean heroes they were somehow weird individuals with unrecognizable and strange moral. Their speech appeared to be an expression of freedom from official norms and as such stands in binary opposition to the authority of church and state (Morson and Emerson, 445–46). But carnival is not simply an invitation to individual freedom. It invites individuals to join the collective, to unite while grasping their fleshliness in full:

> In this whole the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself; it is possible, so to say, to exchange bodies, to be renewed (through change of costume and mask). At the same time the people become aware of their sensual, material bodily unity and community (*Rabelais and His World*, 255)

The essence of carnival lay in festivities held in medieval times which were usually considered as comic folk celebrations during the periods before religious feast–days. As opposed to the feast, the carnival celebrated the temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order. Carnival was therefore regarded as the time to relax, terminate all work and undermine the norms of the society:

> The carnivalesque principle abolishes hierarchies, levels social classes, and creates another life free from conventional rules and restrictions. In carnival, all that is marginalized and excluded–the mad, the scandalous, and the aleatory–takes over the center in a liberating explosion of otherness. The principle of material body–hunger, thirst, defecation, copulation–becomes a positively corrosive force, and festive laughter enjoys a symbolic victory over death, over all that is held sacred, over all that oppresses and restricts (Stam, 86)

Contemporary carnival refers to the pre–Lenten celebrations such as those held in Rio de Janeiro and Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Louisiana. It also refers to the carnivals held all

over Europe which more or less follow pagan rituals and celebrations[1]. People often dress up for these kinds of carnivals in specific clothes and exhibit traditional dances and rituals.

The carnivals held today are seen as traditional events, connected to specific regions of particular countries, and although the concept has changed over time, the fact that it is a period of festivities and celebration, the gathering of people, dancing, drinking and enjoying life still prevail as dominant characteristics of this phenomenon. However, carnival and the carnivalesque as a mode of performance in the contemporary world also refer to the use of theatrics to face down power via satire and parody, and invite spectators to a new reading of the spectacle of global capitalism. In this way, the modern carnival sometimes seen as street theatre, teach ins, and NikeTown blockades (people gathering to highlight Nike's exploitation of child labour, slave wages and anti–union attacks) uses its power of critical satire and parody to say something important about global capitalism, and its impact upon both workers and consumers. These carnivalesque performances can be grotesque, violent or quite peaceful. "Sorting out the message, in the midst of media dominated by spectacle advertising, infotainment, and purchased by transnational power, is the most important thing we can be teaching" (Boje). Rachel's Way is an example of a quiet and peaceful carnival organized by a pacifist named Rachel, who was protesting against the Academy of Management meetings in Washington DC. She selected the most artistic posters, usually showing the destruction of wildlife due to construction, the loss of natural habitats due to deforestation etc, and put them up each night only to see them shredded and torn down by people who were actually paid to commit such acts of violence. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that the carnivalesque effect and carnival, as a form of opposition to power, has changed the terms of its realization. As in the Middle Ages, still in the postmodern era carnival's liberatory vision has been used to counter hegemonic notions, and in the contemporary world these are usually the notions of a stable identity, gender, language, and truth. The way such countering is performed and achieved is however different. Bakhtin's concepts of the carnivalesque, even those that are characteristic of medieval culture, can be applied to today's protests, street theatres as mentioned above, and according to Robert Stam, John Fiske and many others they can be applied to today's mass media as well. John Fiske says that "Television constitutes an

[1] Celebrations of a carnival type occur in, for example, Ovar and many other places in Portugal, Roman Saturnalias, Kurentovanje in Ptuj, Slovenija, Festival in Rijeka, Croatia, Yearly Carnival in Kotor, Montenegro.

electronic microcosm, which reflects and relays, distorts and amplifies, the ambient of heteroglossia" (Gray et.al, 219). In an article about the carnivalesque and the media, Ethan Thompson focuses on the traces of the carnivalesque in modern TV shows. He mentions the animated television series *South Park* and its carnivalesque mode of representation that parodies the official language.

> We can look to Bakhtin's formulation of the carnivalesque not because we think *South Park* is essentially subversive, progressive, or even neoconservative but because doing so allows us to recognize how seemingly diverse aspects of the *South Park* narrative are consistent with the overall aesthetic approach to making sense (and fun) of culture (quoted in Gary et.al, 220)

Furthermore, Thompson mentions a specific episode—*Cartman Gets an Anal Probe*—where he believes all the characteristics of the carnivalesque can be spotted:

- **Inversion or Displacement of Hierarchy:** (by polyphonic structuring and heteroglossia). Reversing the traditional social roles and power relations, including the mocking of authority. It can also be metaphorical, reversing the roles of the author, character, and reader.
- **Billingsgate**: (heteroglossic feature), more popularly known as language "games", including curses and insults that constitute an alternative response to official, legitimate language. Billingsgate language, which can be characterized as the speech of the marketplace "abusive language, insulting words or expressions, some of them quite lengthy and complex" (*Rabelais and His World*, 16), is one of the features of carnival.
- **Parody**: parodic inversions for the purpose of mocking authority, and everything that is seen as authoritarian.
- **Grotesque Realism**: a) bodily excess: by drawing attention to the "lower bodily stratum", the carnivalesque celebrates the antithesis of what human bodies are supposed to look like and how they are supposed to behave; as restrained and subordinate to the mind.

b) laughter: all carnivals include festive laughter, which is not negative but positive, joyful and regenerating.

c) dark realism: the carnivalesque effect usually involves some sort of violence, metaphorical or literal aggression calculated to unsettle the reader.

The episode Thompson describes is rather grotesque. In it, Cartman has a dream that he was abducted by aliens and given an anal probe, only to wake up and realize a telescoping eye is coming out of his pants. Kenny is hit by car, stampeded by cattle and eaten by rats. The boys address one another as "dildo", "jew" or "fat ass". Thompson's explanation of the episode's carnivalesque nature certainly seems appropriate. The violence is there, the grotesque images of the body, along with Bakhtin's regenerating laughter, which liberates the viewer from certain social norms and hierarchies by celebrating the lower bodily stratum, and by using inversion and exaggeration. At the same time, these carnivalesque features can be used to reproduce the hierarchal order. Identifying the inverted social order in just one episode, where the kids are those taking responsibility and saving the world from aliens, and cows are seen as more intelligent and superior to humans, allows us,

> to recognize how *South Park's* "offensiveness" works in episodes that deal more explicitly with controversial issues. *South Park* articulates an alternative, unofficial, offensive language–a carnivalesque response to the official discourses that are brought under scrutiny as the sitcom's necessary disrupting situation (quoted in Gary et.al, 223).

Indeed, contemporary fiction itself might be thought to exist, as does carnival, as a challenge to many forms of separation and classification,

> denying frames and footlights, making as we have seen little or no formal distinction between actor and spectator, that is, between writer and reader. Its form and content both operate to subvert the formalistic, logical, authoritarian structures. The ambivalent incompletion of contemporary fiction also suggests, perhaps, that the medieval and modern worlds may not be as fundamentally different as we may think (Hutcheon, "The Carnivalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Pop Culture and the Erotic", 84–85).

Linda Hutcheon argues, in fact, that the world in which carnival existed is not so different from the one we find ourselves in today ("The Carnivalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Pop Culture and the Erotic"84). Therefore, the existence of the carnivalesque in the form and meaning of contemporary narratives is not merely possible but probable. The culture we like to call "pop" today has replaced the culture of the "folk" as it had been called for centuries before, according to Hutcheon ("The Carnivalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Pop Culture and the Erotic", 85). Furthermore, there are many other characteristics of the carnivalesque that still prevail today. The grotesque–the obsession with the body; parody–

laughter at and with others, dark realism– violence and aggression as a state of contemporary visual culture. However, no matter how much we try to fit Bakhtin's theory of the "positive" carnivalesque into this analysis, and into the majority of American postmodern fiction, it is problematic as a result of the alienation that runs through contemporary culture (Hutcheon, "The Carnivalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Pop Culture and the Erotic", 86). That is, carnival, as a festivity, bringing people closer in grotesque, boundary–defying realities, only serves to keeps people further apart in contemporary American literature.

> In fact, all of Bakhtin's positive readings – of birth and death cycles, of the community of the people, of the inverted order – somehow do not quite ring true to today's pop culture. Instead we find an inverted but demonic world of folly, pain and confusion, one that Northrop Frye has labelled as "ironic" (Hutcheon, "The Carnivalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Pop Culture and the Erotic", 86)

Despite the different readings of the carnivalesque, the basic conceptual idea of the carnivalesque and the carnival has stayed the same. That is, as the Middle Age festivities, as described by Bakhtin, were a means to demystify authority, so are the contemporary forms of narrative a form of subverting "elitist, high brow concepts of literature" (Hutcheon, "The Carnivalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Pop Culture and the Erotic" 87). No wonder then that in contemporary narratives, one cannot find clear definitions of genres' boundaries. Jakob Lothe for example wonders what a novel is and what a short story is in contemporary literature where rules of form have been banished to give room for artistic freedom ("Aspects", 102). Maybe the best examples lie in poetry. Twentieth century American poets experimented with form as no other group of poets did. Disregarding the rules for writing poetry they discovered new, possibly more personal and intimate, ways of expression. Hence the revival of philosophical lyricism, spontaneity, free verse rhythm, minimalistic imagery and the possibility of mixture. By mixture, I basically mean the possibility of implementing features from other works of art such as songs, films, comics, stories or other sources. This mixture of different elements within one genre contests the preconceived opinions of what a specific type of genre is and what its basic characteristics are. According to Bakhtin, the novel that contains high and low art forms, a mixture of elements characteristic of specific genres, is highly dialogic and polyphonic. Since the boundaries between the short story and the novel are somewhat blurred, as Lothe argues, we may find contemporary American short stories highly dialogised and

polyphonic as well, and certainly in the short stories by the two American short story writers selected, and thus uncover the carnivalesque effect in both.

2.1 Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia: Carnivalesque Features in the Displacing of Hierarchy

Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque is based on and intrinsically connected to three other concepts he developed: dialogism, heteroglossia and polyphony. In order to search for evidence of carnivalesque and its features in the short story genre in contemporary America these three concepts have to be addressed briefly and notes made of their existence within the stories of Eisenberg and Tower.

When Bakhtin studied representative literary texts, he posited two crucial questions: the first was what type of social climate, historical background, possible resources and liveable realities have been facilitated and obtained in the creation of a literary work? And the second question evolves around the qualities that led to these writers being recognized as timeless authors of universal works of art? Such questions led Bakhtin to developing his literary theory, which differs from theories as proposed by the Structuralists, Formalists, Freudians and Marxists in the sense that the particular acts or parole (Saussure) of a literary text are not just mere instantiations of timeless norms (langue). In other words, Bakhtin studies the language used in the prose narrative, particularly in the novel, as a body of utterances in which two voices are dialogising and interacting with one another. The utterance, unlike the sentence, correlates directly with, "the extraverbal context of reality (situation, setting, prehistory) and with the utterances of other speakers" (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres", 73).

Bakhtin opted for studying communication, utterances situated within the framing context of their dialogic interrelations with other utterances; whereas traditional disciplines such as the philosophy of language, stylistics, and linguistics had studied sentences as decontextualized lexical and grammatical forms (Zappen, "Bibliography: Mikhail Bakhtin", 11). The study of communication involves framing a context in which utterances include both the author of every utterance, whether speaker or writer, and the persons to whom the author responds and from whom the author respects their response. Writers

therefore takes an active position, "in one referentially semantic sphere or another," that is, a position in relation to its subject or theme (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres", 84–90). The other participants in this act of communication also share their opinions on the theme created and dialogize with the author at the same time. Therefore, when the author responds, the author constructs each utterance according to a personal expressive attitude toward that specific theme but also expresses, "other viewpoints, world views, trends, theories and so forth" (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres", 94). Zappen says that: "In a traditional literary work, the author creates and interprets the world depicted in the work from a position that is higher and qualitatively different from that of the characters" ("Bibliography: Mikhail Bakhtin", 38). In Dostoevsky's works, the author occupies a position on the same plane with the characters and in dialogue with them. This is one of the first and most important conditions for the development of the carnivalesque effect. The inversion of hierarchy begins by dialogising, Bakhtin claims. James P.Zappen uses an example from Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* to illustrate these dialogic interrelationships in his book. Bakhtin looks at the following two judgements about the world "Life is good" and "Life is good" (183). From the point of view of logic, these are absolutely identical judgments (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 183–84). However, if we were to consider them as the utterances of two successive speaking subjects, these two judgments express affirmation or agreement between the two speaking subjects (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 184). Basically, these two speaking subject therefore represent a dialogic interaction understood only in the context of the actual historical and social conditions in which they were produced.

Bakhtin's theory of the carnival surfaces from carnival images. The characters of the carnival, as described by Bakhtin, later reappear in his work. The function of the 'official culture' reappears in the image of the "authoritative discourse" or "monologic discourse". As for the image of carnival activity, Bakhtin uses "dialogic discourse", which is like an open and incomplete carnival body, always growing and always open to other words (Elliot, 133). Monologic, single–voiced discourse does not acknowledge other peoples' voices, but rather functions on its own (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 185–87). Such discourse, "is directed toward its referential object and constitutes the ultimate semantic authority within the limits of a given context" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 189).

Dialogic, double–voiced discourse must in turn involve at least two speakers as it is constituted around giving a response to another person's commentary. Such discourse inserts, "a new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of its own" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 189). Dialogue comes to mean a way of creating characters and exploiting their true potential. Considering Bakhtin's definition of dialogue, it does not signify dialogising or communication alone. Rather, it comes to mean the interaction of voices within a given text that may practise explicit dialogue or implicit dialogue in a form of simple narration. Bakhtin's theories stress that dialogue within a double–voice word is not to the same as dialogue in its narrative or abstract sense but rather as a dialogue between points of view, each with its own concrete language that cannot be translated into the other.

Dialogue, in its broadest sense, underlies not only all of Bakhtin's major literary concepts (e.g. polyphony, carnival, heteroglossia, chronotope, etc.), but is also a cornerstone of the dialogic concept of reason that implies the necessity of a dialogic contact between subjects as the precondition for obtaining knowledge of oneself through the other (Lundquist and Bruhn, 34–5). Considering dialogue in these terms, it might be argued that our lives are based on dialogue that takes place on innumerable levels, which basically range from the dialogue between "the larger historical forces of ideological centralisation and decentralisation all the way to the very basic utterance or the word which then indicate the social backgrounds of the ones who use it" (Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel*, 271–272). Comments on the dialogic nature of the selected short stories by Eisenberg and Tower will be made indirectly in chapter four when discussing the polyphonic nature of their stories.

2.2.1 Heteroglossia and Polyphony: Study of Concepts with Relation to Literature

Bakhtin also approaches the problem of double–voiced discourse in his discussion on heteroglossia, the term he gives to the several languages that make up any single language, the internal differentiation common to all national languages. In other words, the languages within a language. Heteroglossia is the condition that "governs the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time,

in any given place, there will be a set of conditions social, historical, physiological that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different that it would have under any other conditions" (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 26). In other words, heteroglossia is therefore seen as a collection of all the forms of social speech, or rhetorical modes that people use in the course of their daily lives (Morson and Emerson 139–45, 232, 309–17).

Texts constituting the artistic representation of the language cannot completely avoid reflecting heteroglossia in its form and content. Therefore, depending on how the given text responds to the heteroglossia of its epoch Bakhtin was led to distinguish two styles in literature: the monologic and the dialogic. The monologic text is characterized by the singleness of authorial point of view in the sense that it excludes heteroglossia, and strips the language of all other points of view or accents that enable stratification of the language and the inclusion of professional, social and other underpinnings. As a result of such a purposeful stylistic, ideological and narratorial monologisation the language of the novel as well as its point of view appear to be flat and one dimensional. On the other hand, the dialogic text, or more precisely the novel, "incorporates heteroglossia, exploiting it to orchestrate its own meaning and frequently resisting altogether any unmediated and pure authorial discourse" (Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel", 375). In this case, the languages of heteroglossia may enter into dialogic relationship with each other. This can be seen, for example, in such carnival genres as folk sayings, maybe street songs where, the use of specific word games parody the official, high language and therefore the dominant culture or circumstances of the time.

It is possible to note that the monologic novel can be heteroglot (by incorporating many character–voices), but if it only allows for one voice, that of the author, to be a fully meaningful one, then this monologic novel does not exploit heteroglossia in the sense of a powerful form–shaping force.

Bakhtin further defines heteroglossia as a form shaping force that shapes the text, both stylistically and compositionally, and that is always connected to the point of views that organizes the text ("Discourse in the Novel", 332). The basic idea of heteroglossia is that each language is composed of several languages depicting social, historical, cultural and other backgrounds. Basically, each of these several languages is a product of experience that people acquire by interactions with their respective professions, ethnic

groups, social classes, peer groups and regions. Lundquist and Bruhn write: "Dialogised heteroglossia points to the fact that man becomes aware of the differences in the speech genres, and that it is possible to contrapose and therefore contradict a given speech genre" (30). Bakhtin even writes:

> Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel, is another speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings, two expressions.....double voiced discourse is always internally dialogised ("Discourse in the Novel", 324).

This new heteroglot novel is a representation of different voices of the epoch. That is, the author does not speak just one language, but through his plural points of view the varying degrees of different languages are represented.

Polyphony, although very similar to heteroglossia, is not the same as heteroglossia. Polyphony basically represents those types of literary works that show characteristics of dialogism and heteroglossia and produce double voiced discourses. According to Bakhtin, in polyphonic novels authors must surrender their surplus of visions with respect to the heroes of the novel. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin explains how Dostoevsky creates the polyphonic novel by repositioning the idea of the novel, its truth, within multiple and various consciousnesses rather than a single consciousness and by repositioning the author of the novel alongside the characters as one of these consciousnesses, creator of the characters but also their equal (231–68). Bakhtin claims that the new novel created no longer shows only the author's truth but a variety of the truths in the consciousnesses of the author, the characters, and the reader, in which all participate as equals (234–37, 251–59). This truth is somehow unified but nonetheless requires a plurality of consciousnesses:

> It is quite possible to imagine and postulate a unified truth that requires a plurality of consciousnesses, one that cannot in principle be fitted into the bounds of a single consciousness, one that is, so to speak, by its very nature and is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 81).

Although Bakhtin's study is limited only to the novel, more precisely Dostoevsky's novels, similar concepts may also be applied to short stories. As in the novel the author of

short stories is a narrator and a storyteller at once. This status gives the author the possibility of interchanging and creating a variety of voices that communicate with one another on the ground level. Authors participate in the creation of the truth, but they also make room for other characters, other voices to take over and participate in the creation of the truth as well. According to Morson and Emerson, the author of the polyphonic novel occupies a new position in relation to the characters and exercises a new creative process (Morson and Emerson 237–41, 243–46). This is the strategy in the short stories by Tower and Eisenberg. Their authorial position should be "a fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position," in which the author speaks with, not about, a character as someone who is actually present (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 63–64), further implying that the author is dialogising with the characters in the "real present" and not simply reporting about the ongoing activities. "The characters participate in this ongoing dialogue not as objects of the author's consciousness but as "free people, capable of standing alongside" agreeing or disagreeing with, even rebelling against, their creator" (6). As Bakhtin says, these characters are "not only objects of authorial discourse, but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse" and together they become "a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 6–7). Morson and Emerson go even further to explain that a reader is not excluded from this process as well. The reader is an active participant as well, as he or she dialogically interacts with the characters and the author at the same time. The reader cannot remain passive, but must act subjectively since the dialogic interaction "provides no support for the viewer who would objectify an entire event according to some ordinary monologic category (thematically, lyrically or cognitively)—and this consequently makes the viewer also a participant" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 18).

Shanti Elliot stresses that Bakhtin's theories of dialogue, heteroglossia, polyphony and the carnivalesque have a "unique capacity of growth" (Elliot, 137). She believes that these theories cohere most in their mission to defend the integrity of the unfamiliar voice whether, in her words, "this voice belongs to a 16th century red–faced peasant or a sorrowing Indian widow" (Elliot, 137). The carnival that Bakhtin presented is not a prescription or realization of utopian ideals, Elliot argues, but the ways of thinking of his hearers (137). Therefore, by applying the idea of carnival and other theories posed by Bakhtin to any sphere of life, not just in literature, it will enable each individual to express

himself or herself however within certain limitations on human action, as no matter how free and non–repressive the society it is, Elliot argues, there are always certain bindings and restrictions (137).

Such a brief analysis of the theory of dialogue, heteroglossia and polyphony has been in made in order to reveal their resemblance and connections and because it will be impossible to talk about the concept of the carnivalesque and the effect it produces in the selected short stories without mentioning its relations to the dialogic, polyphonic or heteroglossic structure of the works I will be analyzing. Also, these concepts are crucial to the analysis because the dissertation focuses more closely on how these specific narrative and literary techniques work in contemporary short stories in two very different, yet most prominent authors as far as the short story genre in America is considered.

3. The Short Story in America and Its Dialogic Nature

When it comes to studying Bakhtin in relation to short stories, it has already been noted in the introduction of this thesis that most criticism concerning the contemporary American short stories has not been grounded in Bakhtin's theories (the exception is Head's analysis). However, during the history of development of the American short story it can be seen how the short story has changed and evolved from the monologic form proposed by Poe to the more dialogised narrative, as advocated by Bakhtin, and how efforts have been made to analyze these stories of the twentieth century, in their modernistic stage, by employing some of the basic concepts of Bakhtin's literary theories.

3.1 An Inquiry into the Application of Bakhtinian Concepts to American Short Stories

Edgar Allan Poe's ideas about short fiction are highly monologic. He was mostly interested in the aesthetic values of the short story and the striving towards a specific, single effect. Poe believed that the use of characters, events, space and time, and even the choice of words are what should guide writers towards the effect desired, and that is usually the effect of surprise, revelation and an epiphanic moment that comes at the end of the story. This means that the short story describes a single event and all the structures, characters and other aesthetic tools used in the short story contribute to creating this specific effect. Thus, the short story has what the novel lacks, the effect of "totality". The short story shows one action, usually in one day in one place. It deals with one single thing. It may be one single emotion, one single dramatic episode, one single point of view. Head agrees that Poe's critical comments on the form in 1830 are largely responsible for the birth of the short story as a unique genre (26). However, the principles of the form as defined by Poe have lost their application over the years. The form has became so diverse in subject and structure, and "short story criticism has been so pervaded by apparently irreconcilable contradictions, that attempts to define the form have been scoffed at or stymed" (May, 113). Wells Tower's stories, for example, do not strive for a unity of effect. In many of his stories, endings are simple, not resolving or relieving. His narrators are usually the main

characters of his stories, unlike in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher", where the narrator is a realistic observer of almost unrealistic events of the Usher family, Tower's narrators, therefore, rather than achieving epiphany at the end of the story as would be appropriate according to Poe, usually continue with their daily habits without being disrupted by a chaotic moment that precedes the ending of the story. Similarly to Eisenberg, Tower makes no closures, he just exposes the problems the characters have but shows no ways of dealing with the specific problems defined in the story. Just like Eisenberg, he leaves his character in medias res, where we find them at the beginning of the story. Unresolved endings are actually something characteristic of Wells Tower. He feels that "the endings do not offer some sort of epiphany but are crucial because they show how human mind functions, how people tend to stick to some details, unnoticeable by others and register it into their long term memories" (Silverblatt). Furthermore, he says that he likes endings where "people think they want something and then they get it and then it turns out that it is the wrong thing" (Silverblatt). The endings of his stories do not resolve anything, but leave the story right in the middle.

Further changes in short story matter, diverging from romantic Poe and Hawthorne, occurred within the stories of Bret Harte, solidly grounded in the American West. Realists, such as Harte himself, wished to locate characters in a recognizable physical world and to ground their lives in a contemporary social reality (May, 11). Such a shift from the romantic, spiritual world to ordinary everyday realism in literature was called the local colour movement (May, 10). Interestingly, in 1884, commenting on the organic wholeness of fiction for *Longman* magazine, Henry James commented that in order to achieve narrative cohesion, the writer has to assume a "central intelligence" which would basically mean empowering one narrative voice to swallow all the characters' voices. Barely twenty years later Mikhail Bakhtin would claim that "the fiction's richness depends on the very multiplicity of its silenced voices" (Rath and Shaw, 94).

During this period and up until the end of the 19th century, most American authors preferred the novel particularly, the novel, which is better able to expand and therefore create an illusion of reality (May 11), the favoured form of the realists. Realists of the late 19th century strove towards "faithful adherence to the exterior world" (May, 11) both in content and form. However, no matter how realistic their writings were, May argues that

"romanticism remained" and can be observed in the stories by Bret Harte who managed to combine the western folktale with the eastern sentimental story (11).

The beginnings of the modern American short story are, however, connected to the stories by Stephen Crane, whose impressionism, "a combination of subjectivity of romanticism with the so–called objectivity of the realism" signalled the rebirth of the short story (May 12). Crane was an innovative short story writer who could juxtapose objective emotions and ironic observations with subjective points of view, where the narrator seems involved and aesthetically detached at once (May 13), as in his story "The Open Boat". In "The Dialogic Narrative of "The Open Boat", Sura P. Rath and Mary Neff Shaw argued that the use of the four characters appearing in this story, including the narrator as the fifth character, "offers an interesting example of what Bakhtin is describing" (94). What Bakhtin is describing is the dialogic narrative in which the independent voices represent characters which do not exist in the single authorial consciousness but in a world not unlike our own, where there are a number of consciousness, "each with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event" (*Problems of the Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 67). Rath and Shaw claim that:

> Insofar as the four sailors, bound together by misfortune and camaraderie, form a community, and insofar as each of them is defined and limited by our understanding of their joint predicament, Bakhtin's dialogic perspective helps us explain the plot beyond the story's irony, the focal point of most traditional interpretations. It throws light on the curious triangular relationship among the three Cranes in the story: Crane the "correspondent"/ character, who experiences the *Commodore* accident as a passenger on the wrecked ship; Crane the sailor/author, who relives the trauma by telling the story and who agonizes over the irony of his mate's death; and Crane the author/ narrator, who rewitnesses the accident for us as a fifth character observing himself and his companions. (94)

They further claim that the dialogic concept developed by Bakhtin helps understand the notion of irony as well as its function in the novel better. By looking at these four characters as separated voices within his story they come to the conclusion that:

> The correspondent Crane, who suffers and survives the capricious fury of nature, has no foreknowledge of how it will end. Like his comrades, he is privy only to the present moment. The author Crane, privileged by his distance from the accident, can look upon the experience retrospectively and see the irony of its outcome. He carries the burden of his omniscience. Finally, the narrator Crane, who forges the correspondent and the author into one, must reconcile the dramatic unfolding of the events in time and his own foreknowledge of the narrative irony of the oiler's death

> at the story's ending. As a third–person witness to the first– person experiences of the correspondent and the author, he is both an actor and a spectator. The four characters in the story, passing through these three consciousnesses, give a complex dimension to the plot unexplained by the traditional analysis of irony (104).

At approximately the same time as Crane, women writers were struggling to share their voice. Women writers who appeared at the turn of the century, introducing new topics and themes into the short story genre, included Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Kate Chopin, Louisa May Alcott, who is mostly know for her novels, but she also wrote some short stories, and Sui Sin Far, an author known for her writing about Chinese people in North America and the Chinese American experience. Some feminist theorists of today, according to James P. Zappen, feel that these writers of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, as well as a considerable number of contemporary feminist authors in America and Europe, "engage Bakhtin's notion of carnival as a juxtaposition of marginalized and official discourses for the purpose of testing—and challenging—official discourses" ("Bibliography: Mikhail Bakhtin", 19). In one example, Clair Wills recognizes some similarities between Bakhtinian carnival, the notion of hysteria, and women's writing in general, commenting that "both carnival and hysteria are excluded from official public norms" and that they are trying "to dialogise the public realm by bringing the excluded and 'non–official' into juxtaposition with the official" for the purpose of disrupting and remaking official norms and discourses (86). Wills recognizes that the power of literature, demonstrated in Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais, is the ability to dialogize popular and official discourses within particular texts and institutional contexts (85–86). Wills argues that women's texts can, by analogy, challenge literary norms and thereby challenge the cultural authority embedded within the literary canon—especially if this literary protest is conducted not only within individual texts but also within the context of dominant literary institutions, such as publishing houses (90–92). Furthermore, she notes that such seeing of carnival as a juxtaposition of marginalized and official discourses sets these discourses in a dialogic interrelationship with each other, not, however, "in their free and creative development" but with opposition and even antagonism toward each other (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 112).

The twentieth century has also brought, according to Austin Wright "the more fully developed moral problems which have no solutions" within short stories (May, 18). In these stories the focus is mainly on the individual and the sympathy we might feel for

him/her. In other words, authors of short stories tried to confirm their existence in the shattered post War world that offered a surfeit of loneliness, confusion and distrust. The characters of twentieth century American short stories had to fight isolation, find their proper place in the world and invent and establish principles to guide them in a fragmented world. The very value of unity, as defined by Poe, has been brought into question. Wright notes in his essay "Recalcitrance in the Short Story" that unity served as a critical touchstone in writing about the short story from the early nineteenth century. From Edgar Allan Poe to James Joyce, short story writers have in Wright's words, "always stressed the vital functioning of parts in a whole" (115). However, Wright adds, that it might be worthwhile to focus attention on the underlying conflicts and tensions of a short story or in particular, "the force of a shaping form and the resistance of the shape materials" (118). This resistance is what Wright calls "recalcitrance" and basically stands for a quality that points to the ambiguous benefits of unity and calls for reader to disambiguate the meaning alone. Wright basically suggests greater involvement on the part of the reader in deciphering the short stories, which have been presented in fragments and often using symbolical patterns. Writers from this period tried to engage their readers in the creation of the meaning of the stories by using symbolism and imagery. The characters they create are not one dimensional, but rather whole personalities, embodiments of the author or someone the reader can relate to and dialogize with. Hemingway's stories are an example of the state of the mind of the period and they represent a rough mixture of, the Chekhovian technique, whereby complex emotional states are expressed by simple patterning with realistic episodes with almost real characters, and extreme symbolism, his "tip of the iceberg" theory. However, Hemingway's realistic, reportive narrative is not the only style dominant in short stories from the beginning of the 20th century. William Faulkner created the mythical romantic realism in his stories about the American South, and Isak Dinesen invented the modern gothic tale (May, 15). Both these new styles merged lyricism with symbolism and focused on the use of the traditional folktale, surrealistic imagery and obsession with dream experience as seen in stories by Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, John Steinbeck, John Cheever, Truman Capote, Richard Wright and others.

Many of Faulkner's short stories, as well as the majority of his novels, have interested critics interested in reinterpreting them in the light of Bakhtinian dialogic theory. In *Reading Faulkner's Best Short Stories*, Hans Skei states that:

> Faulkner writes about the country and the village, about South and about the people living there; the Indians who originally owned the land, the blacks who slave it, and the poor whites who barely eke out a living, as well as the well–to–do businessmen and other plantation owners. Race relations are one of his subjects; war is another; and sexuality may well be said to be the third, although that topic is interlinked with others (6–8).

Skei further stresses the historical dimension of Faulkner's short stories and the fact that they occur in three major chronological dimensions; *the remote past*– Indian tribal life, the Civil War years, *the recent past*– events around WW1, and *the immediate past*–world beyond 1920, 1930, 1940 (10–13). Not only do Faulkner's stories, concluding from Skei, involve set of different polyphonic characters creating heteroglossia, but they also happen to represent different chronotopic realities thus making Bakhtin's theory easily applicable to almost any of Faulkner's stories. In stories such as "Idyll in the Dessert", "Victory", "Turn About", "Rose of Lebanon", "A Rose for Emily", the narrating voice is positioned outside or beyond the story and communicates with the readers, almost as if making comments about the behaviours of its characters. Although the narrator always commands our attention and interest, he or she keeps a distance from the variety of different, unique characters which are characterized by different attitudes and a variety of different language patterns that inevitably reflect their origins. Moreover, there are many other critics who have analyzed Faulkner's stories, influenced by Bakhtin's conception of the dialogic and heteroglossic features of the novel. Susan V. Donaldson's approach to the stories collected in the book *Go Down, Moses* in her article "Contending Narratives: *Go Down, Moses* and The Short Story Cycle" clearly describes the use of heteroglossia to denote the difference between the world of the white and the world of the "black". Furthermore, she comments on and analyzes the fragmentary nature of Faulkner's stories as escaping "all attempts to establish unity and continuity" (Harrington and Abadie, 139). She describes the attempts of the main characters to step out of the imprisoning narratives and delimiting roles created for fathers and sons, men and women, masters and servants. Many postcolonial literary critics have also engaged in analyzing and commenting on different racial voices within Faulkner's stories from the perspective of Bakhtin's literary theories such as for an example John Carlos Rowe in "The African–American Voice in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*".

Also, in a case study of "Slavic–Anglophone Translatability: Faulkner, Cyrillic Faulkner, Folkner, Fokner" from 2007, Sanja Bahun stumbled upon an interesting fact concerning the importance of heteroglossia when it comes to translation. She claimed that the translation of the *Sound and the Fury* into Serbian is not a bad one, just rather inappropriate since the heteroglossic characteristics of Benjy's speech have been disregarded. Benjy, who shows signs of retardation in the novel, is presented as a very eloquent and well mannered boy in the Serbian translation. The main characteristics of his speech, the childishness, the limitedness and inappropriate usage of words, unfinished sentences etc. have been completely overlooked. The heteroglossia, which is extremely obvious in this novel and many of his short stories and is used as a means of differentiating and commenting on the characters, has been lost. In her study, Bahun lists some examples: "Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting" (Faulkner, 1). For this concrete example, Bahun claims that:

> "Curling" is translated as "isprepleteno," literally "interwoven," certainly not the word Benjy would use and in translation the first sentence of Faulkner's novel contains the implied object of hitting ("ball"—"lopta," Acc. "loptu;") an object which is conspicuously absent in the original sentence (14).

She further argues that for Faulkner, the absence of the word "ball" is not "a mere contrivance to postpone the narrative assembling of the chronotope; it is also an early marker of Benjy's limited verbal capacity, which introduces Benjy's world as a container of more or less constrained linguistic patterns rather than a system of playful symbolic associations" (14–15).

During the twentieth century, the minimalistic, less□ is□ more style, developed by Raymond Carver, offered an escape into hyperrealism. Minimalists, among which are Anne Beattie, Jayne Anne Phillips, Bobbie Ann Mason, Richard Ford, Bret Easton Ellis and many other contemporary American writers, have a tendency to present the world as inconsequential. This world is, according to Zoltan Badi–Nagy populated by characters with desensitized, phenomenological, and inarticulate selves. Frequently the emotional focus of the story is some "underlying event that may not be described or even referred to in the story" (quoted in Sapp, 82–83). In effect, Cynthia J. Hallet writes, the writer must somehow "frame the empty space carefully enough so that the reader has at least a faint chance of inferring from what has been given exactly what has been omitted" (487).

Functioning in this way, minimalism enables the author to involve the reader in the process of decoding the work. Hallet notes that:

> In some minimalist short fiction, the action seems totally gratuitous and all emotion swept under the surface of a dispassionate narrative voice and unmodulated dialogue. Thus, minimalist prose creates not only the illusion of a "storyless story" in its commitment to apparently disjointed fragments, but also of an "authorless story," in its extraordinary power to articulate a different voice (487–488).

There have been many attempts since the appearance of minimalist short stories to somehow try to decipher them by looking at them as a whole within a collection. In order to contextualize these minimalistic stories, many literary analysists have found refugee in Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, which has served as this unifying device. In "The Problem of Being Alive; A Chronotopic Analysis of Amy Hempel's Short Fiction", Sharon Steringa used Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope to analyze Amy Hempel's minimalistic stories. She believes that Amy Hempel's stories, due to their compactness, have complex combinations of chronotopes and chronotopic motifs which, by means of connecting metaphors, unify these stories. Gregory P. Lainsbury does the same in "The Carver Chronotope: Contextualizing Raymond Carver" from 1988. Lainsbury describes the different chronotopes that appear in Raymond Carver's fiction and shows connections between various levels of "territorialization within the chronotope" (5), focusing on the relationship between characters and kinds of physical environments they inhabit, the relationships between the characters and their own bodily existences, and the relationships between characters and the kinds of families in which they are raised.

However, the short story and the short story analysis, including analysis focusing on Bakhtin's literary theories has, according to Kathryn VanSpanckeren, lost its luster by the late l970s; at least to a certain degree. Experimental metafictional stories had gone as far as they could in the works of Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, John Barth, and William Gass. Some of the biggest weekly magazines that usually published short stories, such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, had collapsed.

May comments; nonetheless:

> Although until recently there has been no significant effort to develop a unified approach to the short story, a number of suggestive comments have been made about the short story form since Matthew's *The Philosophy of the Short Story* from 1901. However, because the form has been so overshadowed by critical attention to

> the novel, these remarks were largely ignored until the publication of *Short Story Theories* in 1967, which collected a number of essays on the form and provided an annotated bibliography and many more (112–113).

Scholars, however, do not agree over the current state of the American short fiction. Some critics like Noel H. Kaylor believe that, although the postmodern short story left a "lasting mark" in the latter half of the 20th century, postmodernism in the short story genre is coming to an end (quoted in Werlock, *The Facts on File Companion to the American Short Story,* vii). Other critics disagree with this claim. Ellen Burlington Harington, for instance, sees the "compressed and classic form of the story" as specifically suitable for women writers concerned with "gender, race, class, ethnicity and sexuality" (quoted in Werlock, *The Facts on File Companion to the American Short Story,* vii). Other scholars such as Gerald Kennedy, Gerald Lynch and James Nagel have written about the importance of the short story and its use in the modern world, but also about its attractiveness to those writers of various ethnic backgrounds in the United States and Canada. In his study of the short story cycles of Louise Erdrich, Jamaica Kincaid, Susan Minot, Sandra Cisneros, Ti O'Brien, Julia Alvarez, Amy Tan and Robert Olen Butler, the scholar James Nigel writes about the gender, ethnic and racial appeal of the short story: "Literature is no small factor force, in the sense that it provides a window into the soul of a nation, revealing both its anguish and its bliss, its promise and its internal struggle" (quoted in Werlock, *The Facts on File Companion to the American Short Story,* vii).

Abby H.P. Werlock, the author of *The Facts on File Companion to the American Short Story* writes that:

> The American fascination with the short story and the short story cycle continues unabated. The appearance of film adaptations of short stories is indicative of the power of the genre: witness for an example, the subsequent film adaptation of Anne Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain". Similarly, the many important recent books on the genre testify to its vitality like *The Contemporary American Short Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (2003), *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues* (2003), *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story* (2006), *Behind the Short Story: From First to Final Draft* (2007) etc. (v).

Apart from these books, short stories now appear profusely online. They are available in electronic form and therefore more accessible to readers. Many magazines and journals still publish stories every week, and there are more and more new emerging authors begin their careers by writing short stories. Werlock feels that the new century indeed seems to

offer an energizing climate for all forms of short fiction in America, perhaps because, as Martin Scofield puts it: "Its ratio of insight to length is greater than that of the novel" (quoted in Werlock, 238).

Undoubtedly, the short story, characterized as a "national American form" by Frank O'Connor, appears to have kept its popularity in the modern era, Werlock argues (vii). The most obvious reason for such popularity is the fact it is short. Werlock claims that: "Younger readers […] say they feel drawn to the short story not only because it is not lengthy, but also because it seems less artificially wrapped up than the novel, and thus more like 'real life' " (vii). Another reason for its popularity may lie in the fact that the American short story form has become an important catalyst of important American issues. It has remained a peculiarly American artistic vehicle, but "not only for examining the myriad voices and philosophies of this large diverse country, but also for viewing the society's preoccupations with issues of race, gender, and class; national consciousness; and the spiritual and physical position of the individual in the sometimes overwhelming welter of American life" (vii).

As the short story has kept its popularity, so have Bakhtinian theories. From the examples provided in this chapter, briefly summarizing the major contributors to the short story genre in America over the last two hundred years, the usefulness of Bakhtin's approach might be perceived. It also seems that short story analysis is beginning to receive more attention. The constant reinvention of the genre has certainly sparked interest on the part of the theorists who advocate Bakhtin's approach to literature and who are attempting to apply his theory of the novel to the short story.

3.2 "20 to Over 40" Writers of American Short Fiction: Deborah Eisenberg and Wells Tower

A. Walton Litz suggests that in the United States, the early fiction writers "were led to the short story in part by [...] the 'thinness' of American life, its lack of a rich and complex social texture: the brief poetic tale ... seemed the natural form for their intense but isolated experiences" (quoted in Hallet, 6). Today, we would have to agree that the short story is still clearly a means of displaying a particular vision of contemporary American life, although the society can no longer be characterized as one lacking in emotion and an

inability to verbalize, to communicate, or to connect with others. One of the best known and most successful short–story writers of the twenty–first century in America, Deborah Eisenberg says she started writing because she quit smoking, and it wasn't until her late thirties that she wrote her first story "Days", which happened to be autobiographical. In an interview for *The Atlantic* with Rachael Brown, Eisenberg commented that her characters are so inarticulate in her stories just because she finds it so difficult to express herself in the real world. Somehow writing stories is a way of polemicizing with an exterior world in which she simply cannot make conversations.

Deborah Eisenberg is the author of four short story collections, *Transactions in a Foreign Currency* (1986), *Under the 82nd Airborne* (1992), *All Around Atlantis* (1997), *Twilight of the Superheroes* (2006). Her work, *The Stories (so Far) of Deborah Eisenberg*, published by Noonday Press in 1997, combines the author's two earliest collections in one volume. Deborah Eisenberg is also the author of a play, *Pastorale*, which was produced by Second Stage in New York in 1982, and has written for the *New Yorker*, *Bomb*, and the *Yale Review*. She is the recipient of a Whiting Writers' Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and three O. Henry Awards. Furthermore, in 2011 Deborah Eisenberg's *The Collected Stories of Deborah Eisenberg* was awarded the PEN/Faulkner award for fiction. Eisenberg is a professor of Creative Writing at the University of Virginia. She has never written a novel. Good short stories are "vertical novels, sort of layered," she said for the *New York Times*, "ephemeral, mysterious, condensed in the way of poetry. I like the eclipses, the synaptic jumps of short stories. The reader has to participate very actively in the experience" (Smith).

What critics consider as one of the most dominant characteristic of her writing is definitely her subtle way of dealing with and creating extraordinary characters. Her characters are so well crafted in the Chekhovian tradition, created by the mood they themselves incorporate as well as the mood that surrounds the space they inhabit. For the *Atlantic*, Mona Simpson regarded Eisenberg as a person who "has a knack for the ungracious character" and who is able to paint such characters "in all their irascibility and mess, and then somehow […] by the end, reveal the cranks' greater humanity and even make the "better" characters seem cardboard in comparison" (Simpson).

She usually writes about a wide range of topics among them the American involvement in the governmental affairs of Central America, the influence that the

Holocaust continues to exert on our consciousness, and the intimate relationships between adults or more importantly adults and children who seem to be commonly misunderstood and misinterpreted by their parents. Being born and raised in Winnetka, Illinois, as a dark–haired, Jewish girl, an outcast amid the mostly blond students at school, possibly also served as a good starter for creating and understanding her somewhat confused, disillusioned characters.

In awarding her one of their distinguished "Genius Grants", the MacArthur Foundation called Deborah Eisenberg's stories "exquisitely distilled" and said they present "an unusually distinctive portrait of contemporary American life" (*UVA Today*) Whereas the 2000 Rea Award jurors, Will Blythe, William H. Gass and Francine Prose, commented with regard to Deborah Eisenberg's writing:

> At once expansive and compressed, generously compassionate and surgically precise, elegant and searing, Deborah Eisenberg's luminous fiction peels back the carapace of the visible world to reveal the secret layers and levels, the wonders of the parallel universe that underlie ordinary reality. Embracing poetry and philosophy, the grittiest political realities and the most exalted mysteries of the human heart, the grief of childhood and the consolations of retrospect, her collections – from the earliest, *Transactions in a Foreign Currency*, to the most recent, *All Around Atlantis* remind us (in case we need reminding) that the short story can be a capacious, as dense, as profound, and rewarding as the longest and most ambitious novel (Blythe et.al.).

Deborah Eisenberg is a writer whose works present a distinctive portrait of contemporary American life. She usually situates women and men in her stories who are coming to terms with their personal relationships and trying to somehow deal with the social context in which those relationships occur. Much of her expressiveness is due to the extended use of dialogue and shifts in point of view that are sometimes difficult to pick up by the reader. The subtle observations and perceptions of her characters' emotional nuances and wit continue to mark her recent collection *Twilight of the Superheroes*.

However, it has been said that Eisenberg has changed her mode of writing over the years and it has not always been as profoundly striking and elaborate as in her recent short story collections. Looking at her career chronologically, it is hard not to notice the shift in her style and themes. In her first collection of short stories, Eisenberg used the form of the dramatic dialogue, which she believed offered her intimate, moment–to–moment access to the surprises and disappointments of her characters. However, she had a feeling she was

somehow cheating, by making all of her protagonists an "I". In an interview with Rachael Brown, for *The Atlantic*, she said that one day she just stopped using the first person and started using the third person. She implemented the third person narration in her second collection and discovered a whole new spectrum of sensibilities, "a voice struggling toward objective fidelity to subjectivity of a lived life. It is the sound of a mind talking to itself", she claimed for *The Atlantic.* Eisenberg also introduced male narratives in her writing over the years, considering the fact she used all female narrators in her first collection and has for that reason often been asked if the collection was autobiographical. She claims that she did feel a bit uneasy about this but "that was the easiest way for me to write them" (Brown).

Another noticeable change is definitely observed in the way the strength and the forcefulness of the characters, especially the female ones, has changed. In her first collection female characters can be perceived as fragile. In the story named "Days", we are presented with a woman who doesn't seem to have many close friends or a relationship and gets completely devastated when some men on the track make rude comments about her running. In *Twilight of the Superheroes*, the characters have their strengths and weaknesses and they are mature in the sense that they do not worry so much about their physicalities anymore.

Despite the changes, which are a natural way of progressing as a writer, there are some things she has stayed faithful to; primarily to the use of the dialogues, both within a character and between character, in her stories. Eisenberg uses dialogues as much as she can, and they help her in shaping the character, giving the character its own distinctive note. When she was asked about the usage of dialogues, and the possibilities that a specific voice can add or to change the reader's experience, she answered: "It's much easier to read the stories that have a lot of dialogue; of course, they flow much more easily into speech" (Brown).

Where the content of her stories is concerned, she has always dealt with a variety of topics, as mentioned before. However, as much as the earlier stories portray characters attempting to identify their own natures and claim their own desires like as for example in "The Girl Who Left Her Sock on the Floor", when Francie, imagining herself as an orphan, learns of the existence of her father and sets off to find him after her mother died and has been cremated, some later stories expand to engage more public concerns. For that reason

she set her second collection in Central America and dealt with the public– political sphere of life. The Central American stories ("Under the 82nd Airborne", "Holy Week", "Across the Lake" and others) bring their protagonists face to face with threatening manipulations exercised by their own government, with crushing economic inequalities and with violence ever present, as Jean Thompson writes on Deborah Eisenberg's writing for the *New York Times Book Review*. Stories portray alarming Americans with vague backgrounds, men who are certainly perpetrating evil in their country's names. Yet there seems to be no clear course of action one can take in response. Thompson states that knowledge makes Eisenberg's characters complicit, but helpless ("Don't Have a Nice Day").

Eisenberg's latest collection *Twilight of the Superheroes* has received much critical attention and the *New York Times Book Review* pronounced her "one of the most important fiction writers now at work" and praised her stories as "machines of perfect revelation deftly constructed by a contemporary master" (Marcus).

It took eight years for Deborah Eisenberg to write these stories. She admits that it was a long time and says: "I'm a very spoiled writer, with typical self–deprecation. I need to be indolent, to waste a lot of paper. I'm inefficient" (Thompson, "Don't Have a Nice Day"). Nevertheless, "Unlike the book–every–other–year writers whose minds we seem to know in each elaborate fold and crease, and to whom we can almost feel we have a subscription, there are those like Deborah Eisenberg who publish only rarely and whose books we wait for," Mona Simpson wrote, reviewing *Twilight of the Superheroes* in the June 2006 *The Atlantic.* The attractiveness for reviewers tended to lie in its portrayal of normal life, life anyone, or anyone form middle class, could have been leading, or that we know someone is. Ben Marcus, writing in the *New York Times* couldn't have said it better:

> It's rare to find a writer as beguilingly abstract as Eisenberg working in the literary tradition of familial angst that the stories of John Cheever defined so vividly. Aloof to the journalistic side of fiction, she's still deeply enjoyable to read — indeed, ruthlessly acerbic and insightful. Few writers could, for instance, imagine the well–pressed customers at a restaurant in clinical terms that are also oddly lyrical, as Eisenberg does in "Like It or Not": "This aggregation of hairy vertebrates, scrubbed, scented, prancing about on hind legs, was ruthlessly bent on physical gratifications — tactile, visual, gustatory, genital. . . . The candles! The flowers! A trough providing mass feedings for naked guests would be less pornographic" (Marcus).

Or as Alan Cheuse in the *San Francisco Chronicle* commented:

> Every day there were new effects, modulations of colours and light, as if something were being perfected at the core. Going from day to day was like unwrapping the real day from other days made out of splendid, fragile, colored tissue. That's an observation about the ordinary round of things as understood by a character named Kristina in a fine story titled "Window" from *Twilight of the Superheroes*, the superb new story collection by Deborah Eisenberg, one of America's finest writers.

Twilight of the Superheroes contains six stories and each of them is filled with sorrow, past regrets and constant desires. The stories range in plot from a group of young New Yorkers contemplating life after September 11, to a woman escaping a terrifying relationship in "Window". One of the things that makes these stories relate to the concept of the carnivalesque instantly is the feeling of dread and unpredictability. There is a suggestion that bad as things are right now, they might just get worse and a reminder, even from the first pages of Eisenberg's latest collection, that "the world is full of terrifying surprises" (3). This feeling of dread is something that brings these stories together and gives them their unique character and continuity across the collection.

The title story masterfully constructs the resonance of September 11 attacks by describing personal shocks and recoils. The very public event is not the main protagonist here, serving instead, the purpose of connecting to what the characters are feeling. Nathaniel and his four friends witnessed the World Trade Center catastrophe while having coffee on the terrace of the apartment they were subletting from a Japanese businessman, and as Regina Marler from the *New York Observer* indicates it isn't "the 'terrifying surprise' of 9/11 that grips Ms. Eisenberg, but rather the emotional aftermath of the attacks: the guilt and dread that rush into the space once occupied by the ordinary, shifting concerns of the day–to–day. Always in front of you now was the sight that had been hidden by the curtain, of all those irrepressibly, murderously angry people" (Marler). She further believes that this kind of a literature is a literature of "post–traumatic stress". The New Yorkers in Eisenberg's collection are, as she puts it, "caught between the longing to forget and the wrenching specificity of memory" (Marler).

In "Some Other, Better Otto", Otto, a seemingly satisfied and content homosexual is a man who appears to have it all: a devoted partner, a well–planned and privileged life, even the will and ability to deal with his family. However, Otto is not satisfied at all. He is miserable and can barely withstand tearing himself apart. When visiting his schizophrenic sister Sharon and eating a bad cake out of a plain, white dish, reality hits him and he starts thinking on the "special, beautiful plates" and "special, beautiful furniture" (56). Otto

believed that the more special things you have, the more special you yourself become. But at that moment in Sharon's apartment he realized that those specialities "actually served to illustrate how corroded he was, how threadbare his native resources, how impoverished his discourse with everything that lived and was human" (57). This unpredictability of behaviour and the sudden epiphanic realizations of the characters are what Deborah Eisenberg is best at. The story where this feeling of dread, a sort of a dark realism, is most obvious is probably "Window"."Window" withholds a great deal of information at its beginning and only gradually opens to tell us a story about a young woman, who is sitting in another woman's kitchen (who proves to be her half–sister) with a child named Noah, whom we will only later discover she kidnapped from her abusive boyfriend. What will happen to them and how their lives are going to be resolved is not stated or even hinted at. The *New York Times* referred to this story as "nearly gothic, shimmering with menace, and its ending, bringing the plot full circle, creates echoes of sadness: who can ever be trusted to protect a child in need?" (Thompson, "Don't Have a Nice Day")

Kristina dreads for her life and the life of a baby boy Noah, whom she kidnapped and with whom she is on the run. The dark reality that this young woman finds herself in comes as a surprise. The reason lies in the fact that the story is fragmentary and told in epiphanic moments from the viewpoint of Kristina's sub consciousness. It appears, at first, that the life she had been leading with her boyfriend was idyllic. However, soon we realize the abusive and aggressive nature of the man Kristina has been living with. The future of Kristina and Noah is unpredictable, unresolved and at most gloomy.

Eisenberg creates unpredictability on purpose and leaves her characters where they are, right in the middle of their lives, merely displaying the conditions and disturbances of each and every one of them. For *Harper's Magazine,* Jonathan Dee comments:

> What keeps these stories from insufficiency is that they do not just name–check the characters' troubles (gay ex–husband, obnoxious family); they make the effort to build these emotional conditions from the ground up, so that by the time Eisenberg is done, the reader has internalized her own conviction that the intensity of these particular states of mind would only be diminished by any sort of resolution that might be grafted onto them (Dee).

There are thus no definitive answers or solutions to problems or resolutions to specific conditions. There are only sudden point–of–view shifts that force us to see an old situation in an entirely new way. In "Like It or Not", one would assume that Count Henry is

courting Kate and that this story might evolve into romance, Eisenberg leaves Kate's perceptions somewhere in the middle of the story and lands in the count's brain just to discover that he lusts, not after Kate, but a teenage girl. The shift as well as the surprise is overwhelming.

How wonderfully Eisenberg makes these shifts is also presented in the last story of the collection "The Flaw of the Design". Daniel Swift commented on this story in the *Telegraph:*

> Compressed almost to the condition of haiku, it is an account of a woman's affair and her unhappy family life; her cold husband; and their over–articulate son. The tensions of their conversation over the family dinner are impossible to convey in quotation. The scene is dense, discomfiting and oddly satisfying (Swift).

The only point of view we are exposed to here, unlike in "Like It or Not", is however that of a middle–aged wife. We find out from the wife's point of view that they have been moving a lot, that their son Oscar has outbursts of anger directed against the father, probably judging him for the work he does as well as resenting him for having to move so much when he was a child, and all these feelings become apparent over dinner the wife prepared. The name of this woman is never revealed. She is deliberately made universal, reachable, identifiable, and recognizable in the real world. The story shows the variations and shifts of her mind and surprises with the level of serenity she possesses after just having an affair with a complete stranger she picked up from the metro station.

These shifts in the point of view, mingled with profound inner dialogues, represent different types of voices within the story. The points of view might belong to one person alone or to a variety of characters appearing in the story. What is crucial about this polyphony is that it enables the creation of a character as well as the display of specific situations from various angles. Such a strategy is usually implemented in novels, especially Dostoevsky's as Bakhtin explained, and serves the purpose of detaching the work of art from its author by allowing the readers to have possibilities or options within the story. The polyphonic nature of Eisenberg's stories, as well as other carnivalesque features of her work will be discussed in the following chapters.

Having an odd name and writing even odder stories, didn't prevent Wells Tower from becoming any less famous than he is. A 37–year–old American short story writer he

was born in Vancouver in 1973 but grew up in North Carolina. He received a B.A. in anthropology and sociology from Wesleyan University and an M.F.A. in fiction writing from Columbia University. He lives, at times, in both Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and Brooklyn, New York. He is a frequent contributor of journalism to high–profile publications like *Harper's* and the *Washington Post,* and the nine stories from his collection *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned* were all previously published in various magazines. As a journalist, he has tried to write about the world by actively participating in it. For *Outside,* he decide to sail the Wekiva River, filled with alligators, in a 44–inch tire tube, which was, as he explains it, a part of his plan to remake John Cheever's short story "The Swimmer," using Florida's rivers as a substitute for the swimming pools of Westchester County. For a *Post* assignment, he got a job as a carnival worker. He thought he would work a complete season, to really get to know the carnies, but he ended up phoning a friend and leaving after a week.

> Essentially, I spent a week doing this crazy thing at the carnival. You know, carnies were this misunderstood class, that everybody thought that they were these lawless gypsies, crackheads, murderers and that sort of thing. And I was going to do this undercover thing where I would get a job in the carnival and penetrate all of those stereotypes. Well, I got the job and immediately discovered that all of those stereotypes were totally, one hundred percent spot–on. I didn't meet anyone who hadn't done extensive prison time. It was kind of a scary experience. So I got out of there. It was a good journalistic boot camp, though, just because it really trained me how to observe things (Guzzardi).

His first story "Down to the Valley" was published in the *Paris Review*, in November of 2001. At the time he was a MFA student at Columbia. Since then he has published travel writing in the *New York Times*, in *Outside Magazine*; nonfiction in *Harper's,* the *Washington Post*; fiction in *The New Yorker* and *McSweeney's* and even wrote a hardware review in *The Believer***.**

Will Guzzardi, a columnist at *Wag's Revue*, commented in an interview with Wells Tower that one of the pieces that really helped put Tower on the map was "Bird–Dogging the Bush Vote in Harpers". The story was written in 2005, and it is not a part of the collection. It is a personal story, more or less, inspired by Tower's volunteering with the Bush campaign in Florida in 2004. Tower travelled to Florida for the purpose of infiltrating the Republican presidential campaign and reporting on the inner workings of its re–election personnel, while working for *Harpers*. He went there convinced that the Bush

people were stealing the election, but found little proof of that. As Paul Maliszewski wrote for the *Brooklyn Rally*:

> Looking for corruption, Tower discovered something better, or at least publishable: people to mock. His article–story, "Bird–Dogging the Bush Vote," provided glimpses of actual campaign offices, a real–life political rally, and even a polling place, where, if you can believe this, people stand in line to vote. The article also features countless caricatures of campaign volunteers as well as elaborate descriptions of their appearance: their clothing, their hair, the size and shape of their bodies (Maliszewski).

So, although Tower did not uncover anything terrible, the story does not come up short because he reveals many interesting characters. He captures the spirits and intensity of young volunteers he was working with (Winter Park, which is full of well–off students and professors from wealthy Rollins College) but also portrays the sad, older folks (Apopka). Some of the portrayals are quite shocking, but not mean–spirited. Towards the ending of the story, Tower admits that he is actually supporting the enemy for this investigation. And he worries that Bush will win Florida by the exact number of people he convinced to vote that way. However, this was not the case. Tower even comments on this story for *Wag's revue*:

> With the "Bird–Dogging" piece, it was actually kind of incredible to me that it got the attention that it did, and even that it got published, seeing as the emotional core of the story was really one of horror and disgust and personal terror. It was similar to the carnie story in that way. I guess it was a portrait of the Boschian landscape of Florida in 2004 and just how crazily polarized we all were.....
> And we were still under the spell of 9/11. Nobody who I was spending time with really made a case for why Bush was a good president or why he was going to run the country well. It was that terrorist mumbo–jumbo and the nonsense about gay marriage and abortion—which were these empty vessels that nobody cared about—that they could pour their sympathies with the Right and their culture war animosities into (Guzzardi).

His next important piece was also about the conservative movement in the country. "The Kids Are Far Right" is a story written from personal experiences at the national conservative student conference in 2006 where he spent a week with young Republicans. Tower comments that at that point the Bush administration "was in flames" (Guzzardi) and that it could be presupposed his presidency was a disaster. He expresses his feelings about these experiences for *Wag's Revue*:

> So the thing that was really intriguing was that I couldn't find a single kid—or maybe one out of five, six hundred kids—who'd admit to being a Republican. They'd all admit to being conservatives. They really wanted to get back to the Goldwater–style conservatism that Bush had basically run rough–shod over. George Bush destroyed the Republican brand, and for them to come back it's going to take a whole lot of work to reinvent themselves (Guzzardi).

Tower's writing has always been relatively personal. The reason may lay in the fact that these, as well as many other stories, were a product of his journalistic efforts. For the Brooklyn Rally, Paul Maliszewski argued that he came across an interview in which Tower said that some of his fiction grew out of the articles he had written over the years, because he had felt, paging through his old notebooks, that prime material had been left out in editing (Maliszewski). The week he spent working at the carnival, for instance, had produced 20,000 words of notes, but the finished article ran to little more than 5,000 words when it appeared in the *Washington Post Magazine*. Speaking to *Wag's Revue*, Tower explained:

> I had all of this extra stuff, all of these sorts of cutting room floor goodies, that I had really wanted to put to better use. So the carnie fiction story was basically just a way to use those things that were very dear to me as nonfiction leavings (Guzzardi).

These leavings became the stories mentioned above and made Wells Tower one of the most popular new names in American literature, with his debut short story collection, *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*, which received positive reviews from critics as well as readers. Tower also received two Pushcart Prizes, the 2002 Plimpton (Discovery) Prize from *The Paris Review*, and a Henfield Foundation Award. Farrar, Straus and Giroux published Tower's first short story collection, *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned* in 2009, containing nine stories, the majority of them, as said, previously published in different magazines. The book was reviewed twice in the *New York Times*, by both Edmund White and Michiko Kakutani. Kakutani selected it as one of her ten best books of 2009.

Edmund White declared every story in the collection "polished and distinctive" (White). Tower, he said, "has invented a world of rough men and strong women". The men are "older, battered, no longer successful…half–defeated he–men, bumbling and only partly tamed" (White). Michiko Kakutani pronounced *Everything Ravaged* an "arresting debut" and Tower a "writer of uncommon talent," possessing Sam Shepard's "radar for the

violent, surreal convolutions of American society," Frederick Barthelme's ear for dialogue, and David Foster Wallace's eye for "the often hilarious absurdities of contemporary life." Tower, she went on, "uses his reportorial talent for description to conjure the glum, shopworn world" his characters inhabit (Kakutani).

The good reviews just kept piling up and the only drawback of his writing that critics noticed was that some stories had, at times, somewhat obvious plots. "Plotwise," wrote Kakutani, "some of these stories are predictable." However, although it might have sounded like a serious flaw, in reality it was just a polite remark as Kakutani continued:

> But no matter: we eagerly devour these tales not for their story lines but for Mr. Tower's masterly conjuring of his people's daily existence, his understanding of their emotional dilemmas, his controlled but dazzling language and his effortless ability to turn snapshots of misfits and malcontents into a panoramic cavalcade of American life (Kakutani).

Many critics loved the stories, but they found Tower's characters just too confusing and unappealing. Kakutani mentions the "snapshots of misfits and malcontents" (Kakutani); the moments in the stories where pretty pictures are painted out of unappealing characters. His people may be misfits, Kakutani writes, but they represent American life, and paint a picture of the reality of today's society. Others have seen these characters as sad luckless people, observing and witnessing their life passing by, not acting in any way to change the path they are on. Interestingly, Deborah Eisenberg also wrote a review on Wells Tower's short story collections for the *New York Review of Books* and said:

> We find men and women who struggle to maintain themselves but slip through classes—downward; people whose lives and fates are opaque and bewildering to them though the general outlines of these lives and fates could be discerned by a stranger on the street (Eisenberg).

What one can notice is that in these stories, unlike the ones that originate from journalistic experience, there are few or no autobiographical elements. His characters are pitiable people, who have no insights into their life, quite different from the author himself. Such a difference in the reading of his works was carried out by Peter C. Baker for the *National* when he commented on the first story from the collection "The Brown Coast". Bob, who is the main character of this story, has no job and no inheritance. His father has died recently, and his relationship with his wife is going downhill. He goes to a beach to stay at his uncle's beach house, and one day just starts collecting things from the sea. He fills a tank

with a lot of different fish and other creatures from the sea, but his illusion of perfection and pleasure is destroyed when a neighbour brings him a sea slug which looked, as Tower writes," like the turd of someone who'd been eating rubies", and it kills all the fish in his tank (23). The sea slug, a grotesquely described sea creature, proved to be highly poisonous. Bob somehow relates to this slug and feels "a kind of kinship with the slug" (26). He believes that if he were an animal in the sea, "he'd probably have been family to this sea cucumber, built in the image of sewage and cursed with a chemical belch that ruined every lovely thing that drifted near", destined to live life in complete isolation and lack of communication (26). Baker declares that this kind of resolution to the plot is "eye–rollingly obvious". "Tower's achievement," Baker continued, "is not the pitch–perfect recreation of a lame, obvious metaphor, but the way he conveys how much that lame, obvious metaphor means to Bob" (Baker). What matters is Bob and how he feels and what he thinks and not what Wells Tower the author feels. The freedom he gives to his characters is obvious in the language and metaphors Tower uses in his stories to focus closely upon the characters and their reactions to life situations.

In a profile about the author in the *New York Times,* Eric Konigsberg identified a strong line that was connecting the stories "of working–class aggression among characters in culturally nonspecific American exurbs" (Konigsberg). Konigsberg, whose assignment was to write about the lifestyles of the rich, wanted to understand Tower's "curiosity and affection for a less privileged group" (Konigsberg). Tower explained, in Konigsberg's words, that his interest "owed something to the complexities of growing up in a refined but less–than–wealthy household—a family of teachers who drove beat–up old cars, as he put it" (Konigsberg). He even said that he wanted people to be aware of his upbringing, that it was not so "fancy" at all (Konigsberg). "We lived on the fringe of the New South," he says. "It wasn't the kind of suburban upbringing where the people around us were doctors and lawyers" (Konigsberg) Towers said he knew that his family was less than wealthy, because when they went out to eat, as the broadcaster Bill O'Reilly emphasized, a rare occurrence, a real treat, "We didn't waste money on appetizers" (Konigsberg). Therefore, Tower has been where his characters have been, but he does not paint them according to his experiences. "Maybe I've just chosen these characters from a rougher class because you can see them consider their lives in terms beyond where they're drawing a pay check," he said (Konigsberg).They are different from him in the sense they are not sharing the

same paths and that they are certainly not headed in the same direction. Bakhtin's analysis helps in distinguishing from the two voices, the one of the author, Tower and the other of Bob. By using different language styles Tower makes these characters, although not especially appealing to the reader, extremely realistic and important, at least while the story lasts. This is probably the reason why, in the Brow Coast, Bob's comments, his thoughts and observations sound "lame" to critics. Writing Bob's epiphanic thoughts more profoundly and lyrically would just disintegrate the picture we have about him and destroy the character. In Tower's *The Lit Show* radio interview he cautions that not every character can speak in "perfectly architected quips," and says he sometimes goes back to reduce the cleverness in dialogue to make it more appropriate to the character.

Often critics argue that Tower's stories suffer, at crucial moments, from a lack of human feeling, classifying them as being situated on the border of minimalistic sentiment. In "Down Through the Valley", a man is remembering his ex–wife:

> Often, the first thing I saw when I came home from work was Jane standing by the stove with her hair full of knots and an old T–shirt sagging close to the cooktop. I yelled at her about it, but that didn't help. Her nightgown went up in flames two times, and we had to stop, drop, and roll her on the kitchen floor (Tower, 98).

The joke at the end Maliszewski writes for the *Brooklyn Rail*, "seems off, and not just for the moment, snapping the tone as it does, but off too for this character. It's cruel and to no effect, mean and offhand like Tower the journalist" (Maliszevski). Also, from "Door in Your Eye", a father describes his daughter: "Her face was still a little bit pretty, but she'd turned into one of these girls who carries a big load under her belt" (Tower 132) That sounds a bit mean, even cold, coming from a father. Even in the title story, which is a ridiculous account of Vikings, the warriors speak and think like all Tower's men. The snapshots of Tower's writings about contemporary misfit men and women are united with their supposed descendants, those who lived in a distant time and made their living by slaughter:

> After Pila and me had our little twins, and we put a family together, I got an understanding of how terrible love can be. You wish you hated those people, your wife and children, because you know the things the world will do to them, because you have done some of those things yourself. It's crazy–making, yet you cling to them with everything and close your eyes against the rest of it. But still you wake up late at night and lie there listening for the creak and splash of oars, the clank of steel, the sounds of men rowing toward your home (Tower, 238).

To somehow justify for the lack of emotion on the part of his characters, for the *New York Observer*, Tower says:

> The real struggle, I think, is getting to a place where you can be believably generous to a character, where you can show somebody fumbling for redemption in a way that's believable and not stupid (Neyfakh).

Tower's characters are meant to be believable, not likeable. These characters, that populate the stories of *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*, experience humiliation, loneliness, and anger in all their varieties. The *New York Observer* described these stories as "stories about people, mostly men, succumbing to their weaknesses—resentful sons, first husbands, angry brothers, all of them somehow guilty or deformed but all trying, clumsily, to either make someone happy or be in love or just for once not feel really disappointed" (Neyfakh). Indeed, his characters are rash and unsympathetic, and yet even the most damaged of Tower's characters are seen as completely ordinary, rather than as romantic lamenters on a stage under sensationalizing spotlights. Furthermore, Tower's characters are not copies of anything, they seem not to follow the norms set by the society; and although we might not like them, we may have to admit to ourselves that they do exist and they might be encountered on the streets we ourselves populate. Tower comments that there are details in the stories which are not invented. For an example, in the "Door in Your Eye" when a daughter shows her father, all excited, photographs of people laying dead on the streets, Tower commented that such a thing happened to him:

> I had this neighbor who, when she moved in, had this pack of photographs she'd taken of this guy who'd been shot on the street. It was such a bizarre episode that it went straight into the fiction. These things happen all the time. You don't have to look too far to find horror. I think it'd be a lot more contrived to go in the opposite direction, to say that life is easy and sweet (Guzzardi).

Indeed, horror comes in various forms in these stories. There is always, a feeling of dread and cruelty lurking, waiting to burst onto the page. His characters make these rash and sudden leaps of faith in order to reconnect with what they have lost, their families, youth etc. However, when that does not work, they turn, a little too quickly perhaps, to violence. Kakutani writes that,

> In the title story, the one tale not set in contemporary America, it's the arrival of a group of bloodthirsty Vikings, who proceed to kill and pillage their way across a tiny island they've already pillaged before, lopping off limbs, disembowelling priests and abducting women. In the other stories the danger may be less operatic but it's no less alarming: a child molester lures a 7–year–old boy into a portable bathroom at a carnival; a tattooed stranger tries to abduct a teenage girl; a retired optometrist gets into a fight with his stepson and bites him on the leg. In other cases the danger is fuzzier, more existential: a carpenter who has lost his wife, his job and his inheritance rages at himself for letting his life drift off track; an 11–year–old kid realizes he's at the mercy of his bossy, impatient stepfather; a man who has always resented his arrogant, self–righteous father finds himself tending to his aging parent, who's suffering from a rare form of dementia (Kakutami).

And in "Retreat", a successful real estate agent invites his struggling artist brother to a mountainside cabin for the weekend, and they get to a fight. In these stories, the author is just an observer of the exact moments of the characters' own self–destruction; the chronicler of characters' imperfections, their flaws and how appropriate they are for the world they are living in, and the circumstances they find themselves in. However, relevant doses of humour and comic parody may also be felt throughout the stories, suggesting that even the deepest shadows may only be recognized if they are counterpoised to the moments of profound laughter.

4. Dialogic/Polyphonic Approach to Selected Stories by Deborah Eisenberg and Wells Tower

Bakhtin's carnivalesque and its principal elements are utilized here as a lens with which to examine temporary suspensions of individuality which take on an overtly political agenda in some cases. Subsequently, this chapter handles the carnivalesque characteristics of participation–polyphonic and heteroglossic features as the metaphorical means of inverting the traditional hierarchy in the novel and opens the way to an investigation of parodic notions, grotesque representations and the importance of laughter in Eisenberg and Tower's stories in chapter five, and further re–evaluates their work with a clear focus on the political drive of carnivalesque performance, outlining the potential radicalness and conservativeness of these performed events as they engage in the violation of the usual and the generally accepted. Since for Bakhtin, carnivalesque embodies elements of parody, grotesque and bodily humour, irony, and specific language, which should "jostle 'from below' the univocal, elevated language of high art and decorous society" (*Rabelais and His World*, 7), it functions well as a means of testing ideas and truths, which demand equal dialogic status. Furthermore, within the carnivalized literary text voices claim de–privilegising of the authoritative voice by celebrating abnormality, abuse and profanity.

Bakhtin's literary theories went to America with a fifty–year delay. The introduction of Bakhtin's particular style of discourse analysis coincided with "a massive discontent directed towards the failure of old and new modes of literary analysis to acknowledge the expressive power of marginalized and uncannonical forms of articulation" (Peterson, 89). It became clear that Bakhtin's approach to literature would make a major intervention in the way texts were being approached critically. Without any doubt, the translation of his work *Rabelais and His World* was what sparked interest in the study of the carnivalesque on behalf of scholars and has been retaining that interest since the 1970s in America and all over the world. Kim L.Worthington, a lecturer at Massey University, New Zealand whose line of investigation focuses on nineteenth and twentieth century literature, colonial and postcolonial literature (particularly South and West African), and literary theory, argues that an elevated interest in Bakhtin's literary theories has to do with the similarities between the traits of the contemporary fiction and Bakhtin's

carnivalesque features (133). She says that many characteristics of the carnivalesque, the abusive and foul language, the stress on abnormality and everything out of the ordinary, the celebration of the grotesque and the perverted, the temporal dislocations and variations of stylistic expressions and personalities who spite the so called "high" culture and celebrate the "low", all of them can be seen as resurgent in postmodern literature (133): "One could be forgiven for mistaking this list of carnivalesque features offered by Bakhtin for a catalogue of traits evident in much contemporary fiction" (133). A similar view is shared by Julia Kristeva, who finds that:

> the carnival challenges God, authority and social law; in so far as it is dialogical, it is rebellious. Because of its subversive discourse, the word 'carnival' has understandably acquired a strongly derogatory or narrowly burlesque meaning in our society. In the Middle Ages, Menippean tendencies were held in check by the authority of the religious text; in the bourgeois era, they were contained by the absolutism of individuals and things. Only modernity–when freed of 'God'–releases the Mennipean force in the novel (Kristeva, 79).

Worthington stresses that the reason for this release of the Menippean forces lies in the fact that contemporary culture has lost its belief in, and is no longer challenged by, monologic authority (133). As far as contemporary American short story writers Deborah Eisenberg and Wells Tower are concerned, their stories have not been analyzed in the light of Bakhtin's theories, especially the theory of the carnival, although their short stories have often been attributed epithets that clearly define and represent basic features of the carnivalesque and the contemporary.

4.1 Polyphonic Aspects in *Twilight of the Superheroes* and *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*

Bakhtin states that carnival "doesn't acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators" and that carnival is not a spectacle to observe (*Rabelais and His World*, 7):

> everyone participates in it because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants (*Rabelais and His World*, 7).

Bakhtin's carnival unites its participants, incorporating a strong element of play. It is playful, non–hierarchical and sensorily excessive. (Cohen–Cruz, 167), a form of eroticism which transgresses all ideologies (Boal, 12).

This participation Bakhtin referred to is not seen as a literal one when it comes to literature, but rather implies "the possibilities of dialogising" between the writer, or the author of a literary work, the characters and, the readers. As in John Heywood's plays, as Roberta Mullini explains, where the characters of the play named "A Play of Love" address the audience directly, asking it to pardon the lover and make them participate in this spectacle which Mullini compares to Bakhtin's carnival (31), so do Eisenberg and Tower address the readers in their stories for the purpose of dialogising with them and somehow making them participants, and not mere observers, in the process of reading. It appears that such a use of either spectators as seen in Heywood's plays, or the use of readers in Eisenberg's and Tower's short stories seems to stress more the festive and carnivalesque atmosphere of the text by making participation open, not limited to the pages of the novel.

Although Bakhtin never referred to the issue of the reader in his works directly, we might find readers as involved in the creation of the carnivalesque atmosphere as the author and the characters are, since the reader is the one being addressed and is able to vocalise during the reading of the story in the sense that the reader has different backgrounds and therefore a different way of approaching the story, giving it his or her own "outside" voice. Further, as far as participation is concerned, Bakhtin realizes the participation of narrative choices or polyphonic structures, which enter into the creation of the carnivalesque in the work of literature and represent the individual speaking consciousness with specific desires, timber and overtones within the story. For example, one voice can enter into dialogue with another voice, expressing his or her opinion about what the other voice said. This opinion might be approving or might be mocking and dissociating from the opinion shared by the other voice. Such multi–layering of voices within the story and different consciousnesses refers to the text's open endedness rather than to its possibilities of resolution. Bakhtin saw this type of polyphonic novel as dialogical not only at the level of confrontation of the characters but also in decoding facts in a different manner and in presenting their self–contradictory nature. The core of his theory resides in the fact that the writer can embed voices within voices (e.g., character

speech within narrator speech, narrator speech within authorial speech, etc.), and orchestrate a dialogue among them.

In Eisenberg and Tower's stories there are at least three levels of voices that comprise their stories' internal discourse. These three levels represent the narrator's voice and the stratification of the narrator's voice into two distinct voices; the undramatized voice of the author that carries linguistic–ideological implications, and voices of characters, including undramatized voices and communities embedded in character discourse.

In Eisenberg's latest short story collection the narrators vary and their position in the story as well. Some of the narrators are detached from the characters and are referred to as observers and chroniclers of characters' lives, like in the "Twilight of the Superheroes" where the story about Nathaniel, his friends and his uncle Lucien is narrated by someone outside the story, most likely the author. However, such a narrator is also implementing a unique, personal voice apart from the simple observations. Bakhtin never clearly distinguishes between the author who lives and writes in the real world and the position within the literary text that is often identified in terms of the "implied author". The reason for this lack of clear–cut differentiation is not immediately discernable, but given the profoundly "human" nature of Bakhtin's theories of the novel, it would be reasonable to assume that he finds a complete dissociation of "author as narrator" and "author as textual participant". This startegy is also deliberately generated by Eisenberg in her stories.

The narrator of Eisenberg's "The Flaw in the Design" is the protagonist of the story and she makes sure that the readers are interpolated. The first pages of this story do not simply reveal a description of the house. They actually reveal the sentiment that the protagonist of the story feels towards the house. Her words are signs of reluctance, of contempt, which only we, as readers, are able to recognize.

> I pull into the driveway and turn off the ignition. Evening is descending but inside no lights are on. The house looks unfamiliar (200).
> I allow myself to sit for a minute or so, then I get out of the car and close the door softly behind me (200).

This woman, a distinct voice in the story, parks the car in her driveway and stays in the car for a few minutes, as though she is hesitating to enter the dark house; a house in need of both physical and emotional light. Her estrangement from this life, from this house is even more obvious when she says "The house looks unfamiliar […] John took to it

immediately–I saw the quick alliance, his satisfaction as he ran his hand across the granite and steel" (200). This was the moment when she realized how little she knew about her husband's tastes and her own as well: "I remember, now, my faint embarrassment; I'd been taken by surprise to discover that this was what *he* wanted, that this was something *he* must have more or less been longing for" (200). Eisenberg allows the protagonist to be honest and franc only with us, the readers. Her voice is dual: she is a storyteller and a teller of her story.

In numerous passages Eisenberg breaks out of the literary convention (carnivalesque breaking of norm) and engages in direct address to the reader or to a character. Such inconsistency of posture is not simply a shift in narrative point of view, but rather a stratification of one voice into two voices, specifically in this case, an oral voice embedded within the literary voice. This woman from the "The Flaw in the Design" seems, at moments, as though she is only addressing the readers, as when she talks about the house, and especially when she addresses her affairs, providing additional information on her emotional distortion and loneliness. At that point, readers seem to know more about her than the rest of the characters. In the midst of family dinner, the woman makes a direct remark about her affairs:

> "You are seriously not going to have any of these?" John says.
> Oliver looks at the platter
> This only started recently, after Oliver went off to school (201–202).

At the very end of the story she is more elaborate:

> I did manage to throw out his card. I couldn't help seeing the name.... I made an effort to cleanse them from my mind right away..... There is no chance that that he would turn out to be the person who appeared to me this afternoon, really no chance at all. And I doubt I'm the person he was imagining, either which for all I know, actually, was simply a demented slut (222–223).

The other characters seem not to have the slightest idea about her affairs as she radiates happiness, pretending satisfaction when she is with them, and so it becomes her second voice:

> I turn on the desk light."How can you see what you're doing?" I say. I rest my hand on his shoulder and he reaches up to pat it. "Hello, sweetheart," he says. He pats my hand again, terminating and I withdraw it. "Absolutely drowning in this stuff…." He rubs the bridge of his nose under his glasses frames, then directs a

> muzzy smile my way. "Wouldn't it be wonderful to live in a tree," I say. "In a cave, with no receipts, no bills, no record–just no paper at all….." I close my eyes for a moment. Good. Eclipsed–the day has sealed up behind me. "Oh, darling–did you happen to feed Pod?" (200).

During dinner, the woman shows no signs of the lonely and unsatisfied woman we met during her direct address to the reader.

> "Don't you want the pizza?" I say. "I checked the label scrupulously–I promise."
> "Thanks, Mom. I am just not really hungry, though."
> "I wish you would eat something, "I can't help saying.
> "Oh, but listen, you guys!" Oliver says. "Isn't it sad about Uncle Bob?"
> "Who?" John says. He gets up to pour himself another bourbon.
> "Uncle Bob? Bob?, Uncle Bob, your old friend Bob Alpers?"
> "Wouldn't you rather have a glass of wine darling?" I ask.
> "No," John says (203).

These two voices within a single character intertwine and implicitly dialogize with the readers, calling on us to either remain indifferent or to judge.

It is important to note that in his discussion of discourse in Dostoevsky's works, Bakhtin himself draws this difference between narration by a narrator (*skaz*), and first–person narration (*Ich–Erzahlung*). In some of Eisenberg's stories the narrator–protagonist partakes of both types of discourse and embeds two different voices. Such is the case with the "The Flaw of the Design", but also the "Revenge of the Dinosaurs". This story is told in the first person by Lulu, a woman who visits her grandmother, Nana, after she had suffered a terrible stroke. Her division between a simple storyteller, a narrator, observer of the events and an involved character in the story is obvious. In the following excerpt, Lulu tells us what happens when she came to town to stay at her friend's place. She is a simple narrator here, slightly ironic, embedding voices of two new characters who will not even be participating actively in the creation of this story.

> last week when I'd called my old friend Juliette and said I was coming to the city to see Nana, she said sure I could stay at her place and naturally I assumed I'd be hanging out there a bit when I got in from the airport and we'd catch up and so on. But when I arrived, some guy, Juliette's newish boyfriend, evidently, Wendell, I think his name might be–whom she'd sort of mentioned on the phone, turned out to be there, too. *Sure, let's just kill them, why not just kill them all*, he was shouting. Juliette was peeling an orange. I am not saying kill extra people, she said. I am just frightened; there are a lot of crazy, angry maniacs out there who want to kill us, and I am frightened. *You're frightened*, he yelled. *No one else in the world is frightened*? Juliette raised her eyebrows at me and shrugged (175).

Further, her role as the narrator observer is clearer in the following descriptions of the images on television.

> Happy laundry danced across the screen on a line. Little kids ate ice cream. A handsome man pumped gasoline into a car, jauntily twirled the cap back on the gas tank, and turned to wink at me. A different standardly attractive woman in a suit appeared (176).

However, Lulu is also involved in this story, so she cannot simply be an impartial observer. She says:

> I remember once, in this very apartment, overhearing Nana telling my father that he was weak, and that he resorted to the weapon of the weak–violent rage–and that he used his charm to disguise the fact that he was always just about to do whatever would make everyone most miserable. I provided you with grandchildren, Dad told her. Does that make you miserable? I thought that was what every mother wanted from a child. How can you complain about your grandchildren?
> How? Nana said. Peter is brilliant, but damaged. Lucille is certainly well meaning, but she isn't a ninny, despite appearances, but she's afraid of reality just like you. Only she expresses it in immaturity, laziness, confusion and mental passivity.
> Well, that was a long, long time ago, of course, but I still remember feeling kind of sick and how quiet it was (184–185).

This is a passage where she talks about her family and how she felt at specific moments. She embeds other voices within her narration; of her grandmother and her father. It can be said that first person narration is used strategically by Eisenberg to enhance the deeper understanding of the characters who are narrating and to insist on their intimacy.

Using a narrator, who is outside the story, however, allows Eisenberg and Tower to embed their own voice within the story more directly and open room for discussion. Such an "outside" narrator, traditionally called the third–person narrator, at least when it comes to Eisenberg's stories, does not only observe the events of the story, but directly addresses them by inserting short passages in the middle of the stories that represent the author's personal voice in the story or express a subtle thought of the "outside" narrator.

In the "Twilight of the Superheroes", Eisenberg makes short, but powerful observations about America after the September 11 attacks.

> No more smiles from strangers on the street; well, it was reasonable to be frightened; everyone had seen what those few men were able to do with the odds and ends in their pockets. The heat lifted, and then there was an unremitting cold.

> No one lingered to joke and the converse in the course of their errands, but instead hurried irritably along, like people with bad consciousness (35).

Considering her interest in social and political problems, such an involvement does not come as a surprise. However, the story encompasses even more than that. It begins with a precursor of the frenzy of September 11 attacks, the already forgotten "new millennium" panic. Nathaniel, who is a comic–book artist living with friends in a fancy lower Manhattan sublet apartment secured for him by his uncle Lucien, imagines telling his hypothetical grandchildren the story of the great midnight when everyone feared something bad would happen but nothing did. Less than two years later, that same apartment gives Nathaniel and his friends a dreadful view of the attack on the Twin Towers:

> It was as if there had been a curtain, a curtain painted with the map of the earth, its oceans and continents, with Lucien's delightful city. The planes struck, tearing through the curtain of that blue September morning, exposing the dark world that lay right behind it. . . . (33).

"Twilight of the Superheroes" is also considered exceptional because it is one of those rare Eisenberg stories containing a second point of view, that of Uncle Lucien to be precise, though it could be said that uncle Lucien and his nephew are not functioning as different characters but rather points on a continuum: on one side we have a mature man that has succeeded in the city and lives a life he deserves and on the other there is the younger version of this same man, but with a different name, who aspires to become that mature man at the other end of the line.

The narrator observer, like the one that is used in the "Twilight", sometimes embeds voices of other characters as in "Like It or Not", which records Kate's visit to an old college roommate in Italy, but it also follows her own contemplations, sudden first person points of view inserted in the midst of this third person narration. Nothing that happens to Kate on this trip is of great significance in itself, although all of it is undershadowed by the deep emotional contemplations caused by the recent news that her ex–husband and the father of her children, who left her, many years ago, for another man, is now terminally ill. The ancient and sentimental sights of the Italian coast only heighten Kate's sensitivity and urge her to reassess her life, why the death of her children's father still feels to her like loss:

> And from all the years with him? You couldn't feel love once it was gone. What you could feel for a long time was the sorrow of its fading, like the burning afterimage of a setting sun. And then that was gone, too. What she would remember for the rest of her life was the fact, at least, of the shocking pain they'd been forced to inflict on one another. Eventually when they'd touched, it was like touching a wound (103).

While Harry keeps talking about himself, and again, boasting about his job, Kate drifts away:

> All those years ago, when she'd finally confessed to her mother about Baker and Norman, Kate had waited quietly through her mother's initial monologue. "Don't worry," her mother said grimly. "I won't say I told you so."….
> "Oh, I simply can't believe he is leaving you for–for–for an electrician! Well, but I'm sure he'll continue to support you."
> Kate had smiled faintly "You are? He's going into public interest law." …
> "And the worst thing," Harry was saying, "is that they all seem to want something from me. I don't know what! Perhaps they imagine I'll be able to pick up some piece for a song, something to transform a salon from the ordinarily to the spectacularly vulgar. …"
> Kate contemplated him as he talked decoratively on. One had to acknowledge, even admire, such energy, so strong a will to enjoy, to entertain, even if, as was clearly the case, it was only to entertain himself (110–111).

However, for as long there is action in Kate's mind, there is absence of action in her life. When something rather surprising happens in this rather slow and dramatic story, it doesn't happen to Kate. The story chronologically sets itself around a period of heightened emotion, heightened perception, in Kate's own life; and it is within that frame that other situations occur. When it comes to polyphonic structure of Eisenberg's stories, it could be said that Eisenberg strategically installs different voices within her story in order to influence the reader to consider the character in a different light, to create a specific atmosphere or to divert attention to certain issues. If observed carefully, what the characters think about are things connected to specific emotions and concerns about society and life in general, the fear after September 11, the loneliness and confusion of middle aged women, the terror and dread in girls escaping abusive situations such as Kristina's, or investigations of the purpose and true meanings of life such as we find in Otto's story. But even so, the ambivalent nature of her characters does not permit us to get fully involved in the stories.

In each of the six stories in this collection, an ambivalent main character is presented. We have the intense, loving brother in "Some other, better Otto", the

contemplative teacher Kate in the company of a refined, foreign gentleman in suitably romantic settings of old churches and museums in “Like It or Not”, the naive Kristina who finds herself in a relationship with a mysterious man in “Window”, and the wife/mother coping with geographical as well as emotional displacement in “The Flaw in the Design” who turns to adultery for consolation. None of these characters are perfect and therefore they can be considered as real, their flaws often highlighted. Otto, while coping with a schizophrenic sister whom he adores, seems unnecessarily hostile to his patient lover, William, and sarcastic towards his other siblings and their families. Other characters like the abused Kristina in “Window” and Lulu in “Revenge of the Dinosaurs” come to stay with their friends, but for all the wrong reasons. They are both visibly annoyed when realize that their friends are not going to give them attention, but will tend to their routine lives and arguments. Such writing seems unsettling for its refusing to stay in the moment long enough for the reader to feel involved before it moves into another time zone in the narrative. David Norman informs us: “Reading Eisenberg’s fiction is like staring at a photograph whose edges are blurred. Even if we don’t see exactly where her characters have been or where they’re going, their pasts and futures inform a present that manifests itself in crisp relief” (Norman, “The Collected Stories of Deborah Eisnebrg”). Eisenberg appears determined to render situations without sentimentality or falsehood, as with the September 11 event in “Twilight”. Despite the fact that the stories comment on political and cultural affairs, they are never overshadowed by them and it does not seem that she is preaching to her readers. Instead, for an example in “Twilight”, politics and national tragedy serve as tense background: “When the smoke lifted, all kinds of other events, which had been prepared behind a curtain, too, were revealed” (33). The rest, the attitude towards and the interpretation of the story, is left to the readers. Hence the purposeful ambiguity and ambivalence on behalf of the characters. Such a non imposing voice, allowing openness and further dialogization, makes Eisenberg a Bakhtinian participant in the carnival festivities. Her volume’s multiplying perspectives, including the second person point of view, honours subjectivity, and gives it an independent voice that now has the possibility of entering into discussions on equal grounds with the author and the readers.

As far as Tower is concerned, his stories include many voices on many different levels as well. Unlike Eisenberg’s, Tower’s narrators are either extremely self–centred, as is mostly the case with narrator–protagonists in “Retreat”, “Down Through the Valley” or

the “Door in Your Eye”, allowing other characters in the story to develop only to a certain degree, through interesting, yet rough dialogues, or the narrators are considered to be realistic observers, like the narrator–observers in “The Brown Coast”, “On the Show” or “Wild America”. The latter narrators do not share many intimate details about the characters that populate the particular stories, nor do they make authorial comments as directly as Eisenberg does. However that does not mean that empathy is absent from the stories. Eric Konigsberg, for the *New York Times* states that Wells Tower once said that “I really came to identify with these blue–collar stories. So much of our economic life in America is built on this substrate of brutal and crushingly dull work. But if all you did were watch sitcoms, you wouldn’t even know this class exists” (Konigsberg). Tower further explains that what really drew him to his characters is to consider their lives that seem to be hidden from all of us.

When it comes to polyphony in Tower’s works it is noticeable that the variety of voices he embeds in his stories can all be comprised as one loud protest against the capitalist and consumerist American society. The voices within his stories are not as thoughtfully crafted as Eisenberg’s are, nor have they been, in some cases, allowed to fully develop (similarly as Eisnebrg’s characters; they are ambivalent and indefinable), yet their form of expression undermines all norms traditional, conventional literary writing and represents the carnivalesque narrative.

The narrator of “Retreat” is a three–time divorced real–estate developer who has “lived and profited in nine American cities”, and just recently bought a small mountain in Maine, who invites his brother Stephen on a weekend hunting trip (34). Since childhood, he has had a tense relationship with his brother, Stephen, but after six strong drinks, “our knotty history unkinks itself into a sad and simple thing. I go wet at the eyes for my brother and swell with regret at the thirty–nine years we've spent lost to each other” (32). Although he invites Stephen on this trip with the best intentions, he actually antagonizes him compulsively: He is deliberately late for the airport pickup, and their reunion starts off with a fight. Back at his cabin, he pressures Stephen to spend his life savings on a real–estate venture, then goes to bed angrily. When Stephen tries to communicate his sense of loneliness, Matthew lets out “a long, low fart” (55).

Matthew takes the position of the storyteller, an observer, but he is also involved in the story. His comments are not as objective as they might be had he not been Stephen’s

brother. “When I landed a role opposite to girl named Dodi Clark…We played a nearly invisible couple among the prancing et alia in the dance melees, and had maybe four lines between us….She interested me not at all, yet the sight of Dodi and me together drove Stephen into a fever of jealousy. He courted her with a siege of poster.” (31), Matthew explains, but “the courting” was for one purpose only, “nothing pleasant should ever flow to me on which he hasn’t exercised first dibs” (31–32).

> Or the spring day when I was sixteen and Stephen thirteen and he found me in his bedroom, listening to his records. He gathered all the albums I’d played and one by one smashed them against the edge of his bureau (32).
>
> Stephen’s furies are marvels of ecstatic hatred, somehow pornographic, the equally transfixing inverse of watching people in the love act (32).

Seeing his brother furious is ecstatic for Matthew and such a clear revelation of Matthew’s relation to Stephen at the opening of this story makes the outcome or the plot of the very story very predictable. His characters’ moves seem to be predetermined by their behaviour. It comes as expected that Matthew will try to do everything to ”piss his brother off” starting with not picking Stephen up on time at the airport to punish him for not letting him know his plane was delayed.

> “Hey, buddy,” I called out to him.
> His eyes flashed at me. “What the shit, Matthew?” he said. “I just stayed up all night on a plane to spend two hours in a ditch? That really happened?”
> “I was here three hours ago,” I said. “I had things on my plate today, Stephen….”
> “Oh, good,” said Stephen. “Because that’s why I had them hold the plane. To inconvenience you.”
> “What I am saying, asshole, is that a phone call would have been considerate” (40–41).

The very encounter of the two brothers shows that this will not end well. The same goes for “Down Through the Valley”, in which the very request of Ed’s ex wife to drive her newest lover Barry to town seems irrational and trouble causing, although the narrator claims different.

> I didn’t like driving my car too far past the city limits, and I wasn’t overtly excited by the notion of a long ride with Barry Kramer. But I was heartened that Jane wanted to get us to a place where we could start doing favours for each other. It was her sort of olive branch, more wood than fruit. I told her okay (93).

Both of these men seem to do something they feel that they might regret later. The openings of the story already set it on the downwards path, it seems. Such predictability, quite unlike in Eisenberg's stories, shows a greater level of authorial command than Bakhtin would allow for.

Although Tower gives certain freedom and subjectivity to his narrator protagonists, he seems not to further develop other characters of the story. Not in the sense that the characters do not exist or are not expressive, but in the sense that apart from these narrators, the other characters are not very ambitiously elaborated. In both of the stories mentioned above, the only fully realized voice is that of the narrator–protagonist. Other voices in the story are not as independent as his/hers, nor do they function independently from the narrator as is the case in Eisenberg's "Like It or Not" where Kate's voice (she is not the narrator) is given independence to contemplate her ex husband and his illness as well as their marriage. Furthermore, in "Like It or Not", there is a difference between the two voices of Kate; that addressing people in general and that addressing her friend Giovanna in an annual Christmas letter.

> She sent out her annual letter:
> Sorry to be late this year…..but school seems to get more and more time–consuming. This year we had to learn a new drill……Blair is surviving her first year of law school. Brice swears he'll never…..
> And so on..
> To Giovanna's copy she appended a note: "I'm fine really, but Baker's sick. Very. And Blair and Brice are here this week spending with him and Norman and nights with me….." (93).

Tower counts on the power of dialogue. To say his stories are monovoiced just because the narrator protagonist is a bit egocentric would be wrong. Bakhtin claims that all conversational episodes among people are dialogic ("The Problem of Speech Genres", 87), and in the Menippean satire the dialogues had the purpose of interrupting the main narration and bringing the gods down to earth. Although Tower's narrators may at times steal the spotlight and divert attention to themselves, dialogues between characters serve the purpose of dispelling the narration and pointing to the existence of other characters in the story. What characterizes these dialogues, above all, is the element of surprise or shock. This shock symbolizes collision between different voices of the story. In the "Retreat" the true actions only begins when the two brothers share a few words after Matthew welcomes Stephen at the airport:

> I wanted to point out Stephen could just as easily have waited with the radio woman in the Quonset hut, but I suspected he'd arrange himself in the ditch to present me with a picture of an utmost misery when I pulled up….
> "Maybe you should cry about it, Stephen," I said. "Maybe a good shit fit would make you feel better." I did some theatrical snivelling, and he went livid.
> "All right, motherfucker, I am out of here." His voice was hoarse with fury. "Been a great trip. Good to know you're still a fucking asshole, Matty. Let's do this again sometime, you prick" (41).

This scene is significant for two reasons; first, it represents the first interaction of the two brothers after years, and second, it represents Stephen as an individual speaking character, as much irritating as Matthew (we might of have had different opinion about him at the beginning of the story). Contrary to Matthew's supposed big desire to see his brother, he is just happy to be able to humiliate and irritate him again. For as many details as we know about Matthew, Stephen stays a mystery since the real reasons behind his arrival are not discussed, but it is noticeable that he considers his brother to be an idiot. The carnivalesque atmosphere is most obviously created by the language they use and the ironic comments Stephen makes.

In the "Door in Your Eye", an eighty–three–year–old widower Albert moves in with his daughter and spends his days observing the apartment of the neighbour he suspects is a prostitute.

> I must have spent an hour making my little watercolours and in that time, three men visited the upstairs apartment of the lady across the street. One was a thin black man with a big beard and a Vietnamese peasant hat. Maybe the woman didn't like his looks, that hat or something else about him, because she made him whack the downspout for about ten minutes before she let him in. The second *customer* was a young white kid with baggy shorts and big pink calves. She didn't let him in at all…The third was a policeman in uniform, and he didn't have to wait but a minute. I got excited, thinking he was going to drag out the prostitute in handcuffs, and I'd finally get a look at her (135–136).

Since the police officer did not do as Albert supposed he would, Albert gathered courage and went to his neighbour's apartment, hoping he might unveil the mystery. What he discovers, however, shocks him greatly:

> The idea was just to stick the envelope in the door and go away, but once I'd gotten up there, I had a hard time staying with the plan….I knocked….The door opened, just a crack…
> "All right," she said in a low voice. "What you want?"

> I was caught off guard. I couldn't speak…She wasn't the kind of a hooker I was prepared for. She was an older person–younger than me, but she had plenty years on her for that kind of a trade. ….
> "Look, I just wanted to tell you, my name is Albert price. I'm your neighbour. I live across the street."
> "I know you do, "she said. "You out there on that porch like you was afraid somebody's gonna steal it."
> "How old are you Albert?"
> "I'm eighty–three," I said. Her brow went up and down. "And you came all the way up here to tell me that?"…..
> …. "Okay, Carol. What if you were to just get down here next to me? I just want to lie here for a while. What would be the price for that?" A doubtful extra–chin formed under her jaw. "What the fuck are you talking about, Albert?"
> "I'm not up for much," I said. "I want us just to lie here. Now, I have twenty dollars in my pocket. I'll give it to you. Twenty dollars for just resting. To me, that seems like a pretty good deal."
> Then Carol began to laugh…When she finally got some control of herself, she said, "Hold up, Albert. You think I'm a whore?"
> "Albert you got it all fucked up," she said. "I don't sell this body."
> "You don't?"
> "Hell, no. I sell drugs."
> "Oh, my God," I said (140–143).

This passage unravels the mystery that has been haunting Albert. The use of dialogue enables such a discovery, but it also enables the other character to implement her own voice within this story. She uses specific speech, which differentiates her from a probably more educated Albert. She uses slang, and she disobeys some grammatical as well as spelling rules. Her speech is specific, insulting at times, not following the norms and it could be considered as incipient of the billingsgate language, that which Bakhtin attributes to the carnivalesque concept.

Similarly, through yet another dialogization Albert discovers his daughter's fascination with photographs of dead bodies. The only thing that we find out about Albert's daughter is in this direct confrontation with him.

> My daughter, the very first night I was in her house, she wanted right off to put me in a state of fear. I was not even through with my soup when she came out, very excited, with a stack of photographs. She had them in a plastic Baggie so they'd be safe even in a flood. What was in those pictures she needed to be so careful about? Somebody lying dead in the street in front of Charlotte's apartment, shot in his chest, a black man about eighteen years old.
> "See, Dad? Right in here? See the blood dripping out of his mouth? That's how fresh he was when I found him."

> "So what?' I told her. 'It's a dead man. Do I know him? There's not enough terrible stuff around, I have to look at this?"
> But my daughter was so excited about her photos, she made me go through every single one, all the way until we hit the pictures where the police and ambulance drivers arrived and spoiled her angle with their barricades.
> "After here it's no good," she said, pulling down her mouth. "You can't see anything. They blocked me out before I could actually see rigor mortis" (131–132).

Tower does not explain why people do the things they do, nor what their motivations are, but he rather shows his readers the horrific lives some people lead, and which others are sometimes obliged to witness.

Although it might seem that the other characters are underdeveloped, Tower substitutes this "absence" of other consciousnesses with dialogues where the possibilities of voicing with another and in relation to other characters become possible. Matthew's story would not have any meaning if his brother did not actually accept the hunting trip invitation, did not come to be with his brother and engage in conflictive conversations. Albert would not have discovered that the woman he has been observing across the street is a drug dealer had he not gone there to ask her for sexual favours. He would also live in complete ignorance of his daughter's weird hobby if she did not insist on dialogising with him about it. Many things in Tower's stories would remain mysteries, if dialogization amongst the characters didn't take place. This is contrary to Eisenberg's stories, where the first person narrative, the monologues, contemplations just enabled the readers to know more about the narrator, and be aware of more than they could have if the dialogue was the most important and most exigent means of communication (think of the woman form the "The Flaw of the Design" and her relation with her husband and her son).

This segment has mainly focused on Tower's use of the first person narrator, the one who is telling a story and actively participating in it, making him or her a bit distrustful. However, some of the Tower's stories are written from the outside perspective, where the narrator is someone not directly engaged in the story's developments. In this case, Tower makes sure the narrator is really an outsider. The narrator is not omniscient, nor does he/she interfere dramatically with the characters. Moreover, he does not implement the individual thought process of these characters (the inner monologues that basically provide the voice of the character) as Eisenberg does with Kate. The reason for this, as Tower explains, lies in the fact that he mostly drew all his characters on the basis of his experience; that made his fictional work become non–fiction to some extent, focused on

reporting more than on narrating. For *Dazed & Confused* he noted, "To write good fiction, you have to be a little presumptuous about your understanding of other human beings. But with non–fiction, you have to think, 'I know nothing about this person and it's up to me to do everything I can to learn about them.' It's very humbling" (Beauman).

"The Brown Coast" is the first story that is not written in the first person. Some might feel that the third person narration gives more about the characters and events that are going on. Opinions are not biased, because the characters are not telling you them themselves and it is considered that the reader is thus not in one mind only, but has the potential to be in the mind of many, and know what the collective is thinking. The third person narrator of the "The Brown Coast" is a patient, not all knowing, observer. He observes and notes about Bob. However, this narrator also seems a bit ironic in relation to Bob's habits, customs and his looks so it might be said he enters a double voiced discourse with his character as well.

> He'd come in late. His spine throbbing from the bus ride down, and he had stretched out on the floor with a late dinner of two bricks of saltines. Now cracker bits were all over him–under his bare chest, stuck in the sweaty creases of his elbows and his neck, and the biggest and worst of them he could feel lodged deep into his buttock crack, like a flint arrowhead somebody had shot in there (3).

Although at times it may be felt that there are a lot of things about Bob that have not been explored, the third person narration serves the purpose of narrowing the focus considerably so that readers are not distracted by other various aspects of the other characters' lives that sometimes occurs with an omniscient narrator. This narrowing is even more obvious with the use of locutions such as, Bob felt, Bob said, Bob agreed. It is all about Bob, and not the narrator nor the other characters, which makes this story a bit more monologic than the rest since it only focuses on the aspect of Bob's consciousness. But, at times, it seems other characters are trying to break through this uniformity of thought.

Derrick is the funniest character in this story, one who somewhat stands out with his witty remarks and his use of vet jargon. He is crude, blunt, and somewhat vicious. He has lots of great one–liners like: "Pack its ass in salt and make it pay" (26). "I did a couple of things to his cat" (8). He is a vet and knows a number of useful things animals.

> Derrick climbed out of the water and came and had a look.

> "Caribbean reef octopus," he said. "They mostly live south of here, but the water starts going through its cooling, like it is right now, the current goes a little haywire and droves these funny drifts up here" (18).
> "Anguilla rostrata," said Derrick. "American eel. It's a little puny, but we could put him on the grill" (19).

The use of specific language (jargon), the dialogization with Bob, makes him a more prominent character then the rest of the characters are; however, his voice is not fully elaborated and he gets lost in the story.

The "Retreat" is not however, the only story told from another person's perspective. There are "On the Show" and "Wild America" which are striking for their magnificent descriptions; "On the Show" with its descriptions of carnival workers which spur from Tower's memories and experiences, and "Wild America" with its descriptions of a middle–class teenager who flirts with a complete stranger who tries to bribe her with a beer. Mentioning at least one of the stories, "Wild America", is of great relevance to this analysis, as it involves a third person narrator that functions a bit differently from the one in " The Brown Coast. That is, this narrator seems to understand the characters better than they understand themselves. When a stranger drives Jacey home, she is saddened at the look of her father:

> At the sight of her father, the fear went out of Jacey, and cold mortification took its place. There he stood, not yet 40, bald as an apple, and beaming out an uncomprehending fat–boy's smile. His face, swollen with a recent sunburn, glowed against the green dark of the rosebushes at his back. He wore the cheap rubber sandals Jacey hated, and a black T–shirt airbrushed with the heads of howling wolves, whose smaller twin lay at the bottom of Jacey's closet with the price tag still attached. Exhausted gray socks collapsed around his thick ankles, which rose to the familiar legs Jacey herself was afflicted with, bowed and trunk–like things a lifetime of exercise would never much improve. Her humiliation was sudden and solid and without thought or reason. But the wordless, exposed sensation overwhelming her was that her father wasn't quite a person, not really, but a private part of her, a curse of pinkness and squatness and cureless vulnerability that was Jacey's right alone to keep hidden from the world (181–182).

Tower has the ability to put this girl's humiliation of family resemblance into words. Or expose the rage and jealousy Jacey feels towards her cousin Maya who came to visit them: "Jacey could feel the anger coming off her like heat lines on a road" (171).

Polyphony does not only refer literally to a number of voices, but to the collective quality of an individual utterance as well; that is, the capacity of one's utterance to embody

someone else's utterance, which thereby creates a dialogic relationship between two voices. In "Wild America" the narrator seems to be quoting or reporting Jacey's speech and thereby "dialogising" with her opinion; at the same time he is involving the readers in understanding of Jacey's actions. Bakhtin further asserts that polyphony is inherent in all words or forms: "Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions" (9). In this story, also, more than in any other, Tower has accomplished this embodiment of another voice within a voice. He keeps using forms like "In Jacey's opinion", "Jacey decided", "Jacey concluded", to separate the narrator from the main character of the story, whose personality and emotional disturbances the narrator transmits through his/her own utterances. Although a similar strategy has been applied by Tower in the "The Brown Coast", the lack of emotional depth on the part of Bob, as a matter of fact, the lack of reactions on the part of Bob, make it impossible for the narrator to embed Bob's voice fully within his. That is why, in "The Brown Coast", we mainly have literal, objectified descriptions, because Bob makes himself emotional distant and unreachable for the narrator as well as for the readers. On the other hand, in "Wild America", the narrator can be an observer, a collector of images.

> In the sun warm closeness of the room, Jacey sprawled across the daybed. The toasty, musty scent of the quilt was pleasant in her nose. Jacey decided she would be happy in this spot until her father arrived that evening and took her out for dinner (153).

Or he can address Jacey's thoughts and attitudes towards specific situations, embedding her voice within his like when Jacey's supposed boy–friend Leander starts paying more attention to her beautiful cousin Maya on their walk in the woods, "Jacey was almost furious when they reached their resting place" (169). "Jacey could feel the anger" (171). The melding of Jacey's voice into the narrator's is very subtle, and the narrator, apart from being situated as an objective observer, is also a transmitter of Jacey's emotions, her intentions, wishes and desires.

> What she wanted most was to go back to the afternoon dark of her mother's house and watch TV and eat Triscuit crackers topped with cheddar cheese and a pickle coin. But to leave woods, she would have to pass the spot where Maya and Leander were hiding out. She felt she couldn't let them see her heading home and hold on to any dignity, so she wandered the creek, hoping to look distracted and at ease (172).

Apart from these narrative techniques, Tower also opted for using the second person narrative in his story "Leopard" which is about a teenager who pretends to be sick so as not to go to school where he is being bullied. "Leopard" is told completely in the second person singular and when asked for the reasons behind such a choice, Tower answered that it just sounded right (La Force).

> It is nearly one o'clock, the hour when your mom comes home for lunch. You do not want to be alone in the house with your stepfather. It still angers you that he has sent you down the driveway on your sick day, your special day of rest. You take a dozen steps, and then a plan suggests itself. Very carefully, you litter the mail in a haphazard fan on the driveway gravel so that it looks as though it were dumped there suddenly. You ease yourself down into a tire rut, splaying your arms and legs in the attitude of someone stricken by a fainting spell. When your mother's car swings into the drive, she will find you there. She may have to stand on the brakes to keep from running you over, but you are far enough up the driveway that you don't think she could hit you by mistake. She'll come to you crying and concerned. You'll let her coax it out of you, the story of how your stepfather made you get the mail (120–121).

In this example, the direct acknowledgment of the addressee's presence as an active participant in the narrative discourse cuts through the boundaries and limitations that exist between the narrator as observer or narrator who shares his opinions and his life with the readers. This narrator wants the reader to share a direct opinion, to identify immediately with the character.

The direct address to the readers stresses this need for Tower to identify these people in the real world and to make sure readers ask themselves the question: Could this happen to me, to my neighbour, best friend? Bakhtin argues that by being outside of a culture, or in the readers' case, outside the story, one can understand one's culture better. So, by being outside these stories, readers have a chance to achieve either full identification or full to partial dealienation from the characters, or the writer, at any given moment without being influenced by the narrator. This process of exchange (between participants) is "multiply enriching" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 252) Bakhtin argues. It allows for each voice to reveal hidden "potentials" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 252) promote "renewal and enrichment" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 271) and create new voices, that may become realisable in a future dialogic interaction.

Examples of polyphony occur throughout the stories by Eisenberg and Tower, serving both to distinguish the characters as individuals and to illustrate their common humanity. In some cases, as in the examples above, diverse ideologies, hidden desires and authorial comments are represented by polyphony. At other times, voices seem to be resurrected from the past as fleeting memory without delineation of their source as the case with the letters in "Like It or Not" or the father's and Nana's voice in "Revenge of the Dinosaurs". Such intrusions from the past create the illusion that the story is populated by far more characters than one actually meets in it.

4.2 Heteroglossic Aspects in *Twilight of the Superheroes* and *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*

What characterizes these voices within a story, respectively the voices of the narrator and the characters, is heteroglossia as well. Heteroglossia enables the reader to differentiate between the different voices in the story, allowing them to achieve an equal status with reference to both the reader and the author of the text. Thus, heteroglossia is opposed to unitary language and what makes its uniqueness is this diversity. Heteroglossic features therefore serve the purpose of creating polyphony in the novel, according to Bakhtin. Carnivalesque literature is characterized by heteroglossia, or dialogic plurality, which includes comic verbal compositions, parody, marketplace billingsgate, street songs, but it also incorporates folk songs as a sharp contrast to the serious languages of high culture, sermon, chivalric romance etc. Such language of the carnivalesque celebrates abuse and profanity, stresses abnormality and causes ridicule. It seems that nowadays, the flooding of speech with grotesque images of the body has been severe. The body that "copulates, defecates, overeats" – "genitals, bellies, defecations, urine, disease, noses, mouths, and dismembered parts" – all these grossly grotesque images of being human have seem to have largely been banished from contemporary expression, tabooed and pushed behind the scenes (*Rabelais and His World*, 319). Michael Gardiner called this tendency "the emasculation of carnival since the Renaissance" (58). Such is a tendency in Eisenberg's stories. However, Bakhtin argues that "even when the flood is contained by norms of speech, there is still an eruption of these grotesque images in literature…" (*Rabelais and*

His World, 319). The eruptions of these images have found their way accordingly into the travel/adventure discourse of Tower's stories.

4.2.1 Tower's Carnivalesque Language: Colloquial Language of Praise and Abuse

While many theories stressed the importance and the dynamics of elite, poetic language, Bakhtin was groundbreaking in his efforts as a literary theorist to pursue an understanding and appreciation of everyday speech, the language of the proverbial street. This communication, Bakhtin argued, was equally alive, varied and worthy of study; this was the world captured and celebrated in fact in the pages of the modern novel.

Language or verbal expressions used at the time of the carnival can be seen as linguistic characteristic of the Bakhtin's carnivalesque in literary terms. Since carnival resists order, closure and any attempt of restraint of any kind, its language reflects the same qualities. The language of the carnival is identifiable by its billingsgate as well as the polyglot heteroglossia of the marketplace. Such language is usually defined as foul language, or abusive language. Billingsgate, as this language is more commonly referred to, actually signifies "a London fish market dating from the 16th century" and has become a synonym for coarse language" (Oxford Dictionary Online). According to Bakhtin, this language basically reflects parodied sacred words, texts, rituals and narratives for the purpose of suspending of all prohibitions and hypocrisies (Lacombe, 517). The "various kinds of billingsgate: curses, oaths, popular blazons" are all "insulting expressions" used to create Carnival familiarity *(Rabelais and His World*, 5).

The billingsgate language of the body is manifested most overtly in the stories by Wells Tower. The use of billingsgate not only emphasises the celebration through the grotesque proposed by the carnival, but also stresses Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, functioning as distinct heteroglossia attributed to different voices in the stories. What is to be understood is that this billingsgate Tower uses is a direct representation and characterization of low to middle class people in America, some of which are crafted in accordance with his own experience. The language these people speak is often offensive, insulting and in accordance to what Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque language should be, liberal and resisting any restraint.

Tower's stories are mostly about men, who experience humiliation, loneliness and anger in all their varieties. Although their wounds are described with some affection and tenderness by Tower, the characters he employs in his stories are neither good nor bad. "All right, motherfucker," shouts Stephen, and Matthew replies "Call you, shit ball" (41). These, two very different brothers just simply can't understand each other, yet they persist in trying to force each other to conform to each other's philosophy of life. They can't even have a conversation without offending each other. These insults are however not as festive nor as justifiable as those Bakhtin characterized as carnivalesque. Mocking and indulging in indecent language, is what characterizes Bakhtin's carnivalesque discourse among people who have achieved a certain level of familiarity. The difference from modern insults, as Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia argues, lies in the fact "that billingsgate, the abusive speech of the marketplace, is isolated from context and, like a proverb, represents a complete unit with a specific character" (51). However, considering Bakhtin's role of reciprocity and the ridicule of the high by the force of abusive language, the insults used in this story are just that. They are reciprocal, since Matthew answers to Stephen's insults with another insult and vice versa, and they are both ridiculing the high, as both brothers consider themselves to be better than the other.

In the final scenes, Matthew shoots a moose and feels ecstatic. However, the meat proves to be spoilt: "There was a slight pungency to it, a dark diarrheal scent gathering in the air" (60). The narrator's reporting language well describes not just the spoilt meat, but also the essence of the relationship between these two brothers, because while Stephen laughs at the situation, hoping to hunt again the next day, Matthew stubbornly eats the steak, refusing to admit the fruitlessness of their trip.

Even children use slang and curse words in Tower's stories. Jacey says "Holy shit" (176) as a reaction to the story that Stewart, a mysterious man from the woods who would end up molesting her, told her about how he almost lost his arm. Randy and Henry, kids from "On the Show", compliment each other with insults as well, fighting over who is going to stay with the lizard:

> "It's no color," he tells Randy.
> "Bullshit, give him here," Randy says, swatting after Henry's clutched fist.
> "Bull–true, you fat shit. Get away. He's mine" (188).

Throughout the "The Brown Coast" there is a persistent atmosphere of repulsion and disgust created to the specific negative sensory descriptions, like the fridge smelling "sour" or Bob's relationship being "curdled" (3–4). The emphasis especially seems to be on scents, or words that evoke scent. Like in the description of a basement where Bob had sex for two weeks with a lonely woman from traffic school. "There'd been no joy in it, just a two–week spate of drab skirmishes in a basement apartment that smelled heavily of cat musk" (5). The specific choice of words also enables visualization of the abandoned fish tank that is soon to be filled with fish.

> In a dark corner of the living room, an old aquarium burbled away. It was huge–as long as a casket and three feet deep–and empty except for a bottle of hair tonic, a waterlogged bat corpse, and some other things floating on the surface. The water was thick and murky, the color of moss, but still the aerator breathed steady green sigh of bubbles through the tank (6).

As observed in the paragraph, Tower's stories do not lack the grotesque effect as well, which is created solely through the use of language. When describing Claire, the wife of his neighbor, Derrick, the attention is drawn to her skin. For example, on page 9, "She was pretty, but she'd spent too much time in the sun. She was pruned over and nearly maroon, like a turkey beard". Comparing Claire's skin to meat products is further continued on page 11: "A saw–edged scar ran down the back of her hand, standing out pink and tender on the skin there, which was the color of pot roast". Through these descriptions, we can get a sense of the ragged wear and tear that has been projected on her skin. Bob doesn't seem to be disgusted by the way Claire's skin looks. On page 17, the narrator describes how Bob sees Claire when she is naked, about to join Derrick and Bob for a swim. "Across her breasts and oval hips, her skin looked soft and new and pale as paraffin". Throughout the story, as Bob gets to know Claire, his attraction to her becomes apparent through the ways he describes her skin.

In "Wild America", Tower continues with the grotesque by vividly portraying the image of a cat that just caught a baby pigeon and brought it to Jacey's room.

> The bell on the cat's collar roused her. He'd bought her something: a baby pigeon stolen from its nest, mauled and draped on Jacey's pillowcase. The thing was pink, nearly translucent, with magenta cheeks and lavender ovals around her eyes. It looked like a half–cooked eraser with dreams of someday becoming a prostitute (151).

Similar grotesque description can be found in “Leopard” where a boy’s bacterial infection on the lip is compared to a burger.

> Search for the little sore on your upper lip. Pray it healed in the night. No luck. Still there, rough to your tongue, and though it’s very small, not even a diameter of a pencil eraser, it feels much larger. Your mother says it’s a harmless fungal infection, and she pities you less for it than she should.
> It tastes better than it looks. A tiny hamburger is what the fungus resembles, cracked and brown and perfectly centered in the little fluted area between your septum and your upper lip. Yesterday, in the cafeteria, Josh Mohorn pointed out the similarity before a table of your friends….
> He turned to you and said, “Hey, Yancy, do me a favor?”
> “What’s up,” you said, excited by the rare pleasure of Josh’s attention.
> “Could you you take that seat down there?” he said, gesturing at the far end of the table. “I can’t eat my lunch with your fucking burger in my face” (113).

In “Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned” there is one of the most horrific images of all, the description of the “bloody eagle”.

> Djarf placed the point of his sword to one side of Naddod's spine. He leaned into it and worked the steel in gingerly, delicately crunching through one rib at a time until he'd made an incision about a foot long. …Then he knelt and put his hands into the cuts. He fumbled around in there a second, and then drew Naddod's lungs out through the slits. As Naddod huffed and gasped, the lungs flapped, looking sort of like a pair of wings. I had to turn away myself (288–289).

Tower rendered the description of this excruciating ritual down to details–the crunch of the ribs, the image of Djarf pulling out Naddod's intestines, the lungs flapping like wings. Harald cannot stand to watch, so he looks away. He seems incapable of doing anything, he is a passive spectator, caught in the limbo between true callousness and true feeling trapped in his passivity.

“Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned” is considered to be one of the most fascinating stories in the collection, especially where the use of language is concerned. The first thing one notices is that this story is written in modern language. It lacks the archaising, burdened English which is so often associated with tales of ancient times (*Lord of the Rings* being perhaps the most famous and influential example). What comes to everyone’s mind is why a young contemporary author would even consider writing about Vikings, and even if he did do so, why would he use modern language to present these ancient bloodthirsty warriors? Language is a powerful tool for Tower; it is not just a means to an end. In this particular story, language has a specific purpose for Tower. By using

modern language to describe an event in the lives of the Viking warrior tribes the author is paralleling current times. One such parallel can be made with the aimless attack of the village. The Vikings attacked the village without being sure of the nature of the rumours that the dragons were sent by Naddod, a monk. This can be paralleled with the current war in Iraq and the hunt for the "weapons of mass destruction" that were also rumoured to have been produced and stacked there. Considering Tower's involvement in politics such parallels are scarcely far–fetched and the parallels between modern America and ancient Vikings are not hard to find.

The story further features some horrific bloodsheding and focuses on war. More properly, on retribution. While the older, more experienced Vikings seem to find the practices of the younger, more bloodthirsty Vikings disgusting (especially the "blood eagle" (228)) they do not do anything to stop the actions of younger ones or tell them what they were doing was wrong. This mentality of brutal killing and destruction was so engrained in the culture of the Vikings, they could do nothing to stop it. It is as if the narrator is trying to imply that it was impossible to change one's culture simply because you had been born into it. Tower successfully juxtaposed the Vikings of the past to the American soldiers and leaders of today by using the contemporary American idiom. He merged the two distinct time periods via related experiences. This merging is characteristic of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque where races, genders, class etc. enjoy equal status.

The language of Tower's stories can thus be characterized as carnivalesque. Firstly, he uses street talk and abusive, offensive language in his dialogues, when Matthew addresses Stephen and vice versa or when kids Randy and Henry fight over the lizard. Secondly, Tower deliberately provides the readers with extremely grotesque descriptions in "The Brown Coast", especially the scent in the house, of Matthew and Stephen's slaughter of a moose and of Jacey's cat's torture of a pigeon. The viciousness and savagery is further stressed by the performance of the bloody eagle in "Everything Ravaged, Everyhting Burned". Although Tower's language is highly carnivalesque in form, the same observations cannot be made when it comes to meaning. More than less, the stories lack humour, and the overall atmosphere is not a festive one, but rather a tragic one. Moreover, the language Tower uses is not aimed at abuse and insult for the purpose of creating a liberated, festive and funny atmosphere, it just exists as a part of these characters'

generally frustrated daily lives. What Bakhtin considered as a carnivalesque feature of language has become a characteristic of everyday, ordinary speech for Tower.

4.2.2 Eisenberg's Civilized Discourse

The language in Eisenberg's stories serves three purposes; either to comment on social and political topics in America, without being limited to the implied author alone, or it serves the purpose of description and creation of a specific mood that depicts the character's internal struggles, their fears, feelings of guilt etc., but the language, used by the characters in the story is also a powerful tool for their self realizations. The language, which her characters use, and the situations in which they use it, only stresses their isolation, desperation and the sense of emptiness. Kate's internal monologues give us sense of what is still haunting her; terrible divorce and her sick ex husband. Otto's contemplations allow us to perceive how this outwardly satisfied man suddenly realizes the fruitlessness of his life by attending his schizophrenic sister Sharon. Kristina's language and her narrative discourse enables us to uncover the veil of mystery upon her arrival at her sister's place with a child in her arms. Such a use of language shares some similarities with the carnivalesque, like its subversive power (she is rather implicit than explicit) and its ambivalent nature (doubtful language). However, it is not as funny nor humorous, and it surely does not aim to offend or insult. Eisenberg's language is all but abusive or foul. Her language strives to be profound, sensitive and deep. One reason that her language does not operate as strongly and as directly as Tower's might reside in the fact that she talks about different people, with different concerns than those depicted by Tower. Her stories are not as descriptive as Tower's are, nor do they focus on depicting everything in details. Moreover, they leave out so many things. Eisenberg comments on this "leaving out" for *Tin House Magazine,* perceiving it not as withholding information, but successfully hiding information, focusing on specific sensations:

> I don't withhold information to achieve an effect. In fact, I don't withhold information at all. I'm trying to be faithful to experience, or sensation. But I think there are readers who are confused by having information come to them in the way it does in my stories—it's not parceled out in tidy, discrete bits.
> I remember asking my friend Craig Lucas, the playwright, to read a story. I don't remember which one it was, but I do remember that I considered it finished, and it

> was pretty much what I'd wanted it to be, but I was sending it around and it was being greeted with what I'd call complete incomprehension. Naturally, I wanted to figure out what the problem was, so I enlisted a few people, including Craig, who I consider to be very good readers, without really telling them why. Anyhow, Craig didn't seem to have any trouble with the story at all, and I asked him why he thought other people might find it so baffling, and he said, "Well, you have to be awake when you read it (Keesey).

Such a trait of her writing, where language, through specific narrative descriptions, complements the characters' sensations and symbolically connects it to their experiences is traced in "The Flaw in the Design", where pointless affairs, as well as the protagonist's emotional emptiness, are hinted at, counterpoised with the descriptions of the descending sun or the images of a dark house. The same goes for "Window", where violence is hidden, but its presence is felt in the descriptions of haunting nature, Kristina's dream and small details that we find out about Eli, rather than directly addressed throughout the story.

In the "The Flaw in the Design" readers draw conclusions about this woman's affairs and her emotional unfulfilment merely on the basis of her vague descriptions. However, it is not the affairs are the main issue, but rather the confusion, and the impossibility of predicting the outcome. One cannot conclude from the beginning of the story that she is an adulteress, partly because of the lack of specific language pointing to it, as well as the absence of emotional disturbance.

> I float back in.
> The wall brightens, dims, brightens faintly again–a calm pulse, which mine calms to match, of the pale sun's beating heart. Outside the sky is on the move–windswept and pearly–spring is coming from a distance. In its path, scraps of city sounds waft up and away like pages torn out of a notebook. Feather pillows, deep carpet, the mirror a lake of pure light–no imprints, no traces; the room remembers no one but us. "Do we have to be careful about time?" he says.
> The voice is exceptional, rich and graceful. I turn my head to look at him. Intent, reflective, he traces my brows with his finger, and then my mouth, as if I were a photograph he's come across, mysteriously labelled in his own handwriting (199).

Such is the beginning of this story, which is closely related to the narrator's sensations. The woman is calm, relaxed, trapped in this easeful moment. She is enjoying this calmness and peacefulness within an exasperating day. Her affairs are her escape from her lonely, frustrated, everyday life, her husband and her son. Eisenberg frequently uses such resonant descriptions to reflect her character's inner state. Similarly, she uses the description of the

house to parallel symbolically the woman's emptiness and estrangement from her life, which has been discussed in the previous segment of this dissertation.

In "Window", Eisenberg articulates a certain mood that prevails in the story, and hints at the danger that lurks in Eli indirectly, through symbolical descriptions and the usage of specific language. The veil of mystery is precisely the thing that helps in creating suspense:

> And what had she been dreaming about that first morning? She was hidden behind something. Something was about to happen to someone very far away, who was her. There were showers of burning debris. The noise that woke her came into the dream as an alarm, she thinks, but it all dissolved like a screen over the morning light, and there was Eli lying next to her, is eyes still closed, shadows of leaves moving across him like a rich, patterned cloak (148).

As in Menippean satire, Eisenberg uses dreams to create the imagery of mystery and somehow insert a certain fantastical element in this story. Further, she makes the dream paradoxical, functioning as a bad omen for Kristina's situation.

Often, Eisenberg's descriptions of nature seem to complement the mood of the story and warn of the unexpected.

> Sometimes the woods shook and flared with thunder and lighting. The deer came crashing through the trees. Way down in the valley the little foxes jumped straight up from grass. Sometimes, walking near the creek with Eli, Noah on his shoulders or back, she would hear just a little whisper or rustle somewhere, or there would be a streak in the corner of her eye. Are there snakes? she asked.
> He folded his arms around her and explored her ear with his tongue. Not to worry. They won't bother you unless you do something to stir them up (150–151).

A variety of descriptions of nature and the place where Kristina lived with Eli, as well as specific language, or imagery when discussing Eli, serve as an additional, omnipresent voice in the story, suggesting its fearful outcome. For example, Liz, Eli's friend, comments about Eli's "great, great hands" (158), and Eisenberg makes sure she repeats great more than once. But there are other passages that hint at Eli's abusive character, such as the description about Kristina's and Eli's first night together and the talk about the dishes:

> He rested his hand on her neck, and stars shot from it. If it had been up to her, the dishes would have stayed in the sink till morning–till winter. But Eli just held her against him for a blinding moment. Here's some of that new stuff to learn about me, he said. I am very, very disciplined (148).

There are also short insertions about specific situations concerning Eli that Kristina is remembering. It feels as though Kristina is trying to see whether there were signs of his violent nature:

> How did he get out? Eli was saying. He was in front of her, holding his machete in one hand and Noah by the other, and rage was flashing off him in sheets, like lightening. It was just luck I didn't kill him with this (156).

The latter excerpt shows how simple things make Eli extremely furious. Noah, his child sneaked out from the house and went to his father who was busy with his machete. This is the first time that Kristina felt terrified, not because of Noah and the possibility of him getting hurt, but because of the rage and fury that she sensed in Eli:

> She was still shaking when Eli returned outside. She could hardly stand. Her hand was clamed around Noah's shoulder. If you want something come to me, do you hear? You don't go outside to bother your father (156).

Such descriptive intrusions, commentaries and specific usage of words to describe Eli build up to an epiphanic moment in which Kristina realizes there is only way out:

> She saw Liz register the sunglasses, the masked bruises. She saw Liz politely covering her surprise. And then she saw the thing that she had hoped so fervently that she would not see: she saw that Liz was not very surprised at all (168).

The story, which opens with its protagonist, Kristina, and a young child, Noah, who arrive at Kristina's sister's place, traces Kristina's infatuation with Eli, who is a charming gun dealer and who sweeps Kristina off her feet. However, as shown, not everything is perfect in this paradise and the hinted, camouflaged violence presents itself to Kristina one day. This story finds ways to suggests hidden dangers through the use of specific words and the creation of a specific atmosphere. Moreover, this story focuses on Kristina's escape as well, which is still quite confusing for her:

> Stolen car! Kidnapped child! How can these words mean her? The deer come crashing through the woods, Zoe holds her breath, Eli's rage is all around them, the red net casting wide. What's right outside? Keys hanging from the warden's belt? The men with the guns? Just guns, or guns and badges…(170)
> No one looks at anyone – really completely looks – the way he looked at her. She never imagined, or even dared hope, that she would meet such a man or have such a time in her life (170).

The panic and confusion, maybe needless to say, the fear Kristina feels upon the escape from Eli, is best represented with the use of exclamations and question marks. Her life, of which she assumed to have complete control, suddenly changes and she becomes a hopeless kidnapper, without a certain future.

With the newest short story collection, Eisenberg also became more "politically" oriented. She became more involved, not just as a narrator, or harmless spectator, but as a commentator that has a statement to make. Eisenberg's first story from the collection *Twilight of the Superheroes* can probably be considered the one which is most personal; where the language is not used specifically to mark the difference between distinct language styles and intentions, that of the author and that of the main characters, Nathan and Lucien respectively. In this story, Eisenberg comments on the events of September 11, and in a way exposes her authorial view of the situation in America with respect to the event:

> The stump of the ruined tower continued to smoulder far into the fall, and an unreasonable heat persisted. When the smoke lifted, all kinds of other events, which had been prepared behind the curtain, too, were revealed. Flags waved in the brisk air of fear, files were demanded from libraries and hospitals, droning helicopters hung over the city, and heavily armed police patrolled the parks, meanwhile, one read that executives had pocketed the savings of their investors and the pensions of their employees (33).

This passage is quite isolated from the rest, and there are many similar to this one, especially in this story. It is possible that such an extraction from the rest of the story serves to attract the reader's attention, but maybe Eisenberg also used it to point out that this is her voice in the story to differentiate it from those of others. Some of these isolated passages can be said to represent Eisenberg's ironic commentary on the way American politics was dealt with before, but also well after the attacks. She notices the pretext under which Americans went to war with the "East", and she ironically notices how the meaning of the words they used to persuade American people to go to war has been moulded according to ideological purposes:

> The war in the East was hidden behind a thicket of language: patriotism, democracy, loyalty, freedom–the words bounced around, changing purpose, as if they were made of some funny plastic. What did they refer to? It seemed that they all might refer to money (33).

In other references to September 11 she hides behind the narrator, whether describing Lucien's perspective, or Nathaniel's:

> While the sirens screamed, Lucien had walked against the tide of dazed, smoke–smeared people, down into the fuming cauldron, and he finally reached the police cordon, his feet aching, he wandered along it for hours, searching for Charlie's nephew, among all the other people who were searching for family, friends, lovers (28).

> A sticky layer of crematorium ash settled over the whole of Matsumoto's neighbourhood, even inside, behind closed windows, as thick in places as turf, and water was unavailable for a time. Nathaniel and his friends all stayed elsewhere, of course, for a few weeks. When it became possible, Lucien sent crews down to Matsumoto's loft to scour the place and restore the art (29).

This story somehow complements Tower's "Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned" in the sense that it also articulates parallels to modern times:

> New York had once been the threshold of an impregnable haven, then the city had become in an instant the country's open wound, and now it was the occasion–the pretext!–for killing and theft and legislative horrors all over the world. The air stank from particular matter–chemicals and asbestos and blood and scorched bone. People developed coughs and rashes (34).

As the Vikings used the dragon's attack as a pretext to attack another village, as it is in their culture, so does America, supposedly, use September 11 as a pretext for horrors all over the world. This story is the most powerful story in the entire collection, and the language with which it is written is the most explicit and the most striking.

4.3 Voices and Speeches as Modes of Inverting Traditional Literary Hierarchy in Tower and Eisenberg's Stories

No matter what the differences between Eisenberg and Tower in the way they use language, both of them use narrative strategies that are carnivalesque in nature. Not only do they employ language to perform stratifications between characters and indicate the difference between them and the author and discerning between different modes of discourse, which for Bakhtin shows how "dialogic" language disrupts uniformity of thought, but they also use specific language to reflect on and comment about the current

affairs of the real world. The author is not the supreme voice that controls all the others. In the case of Tower, one voice may show dominance, but is certainly not overpowering, as in "Retreat". At other times, like in "The Brown Coast", the narrating voice might be shy in exploring the character to the extent that it leaves the character empty and dry, but in "Wild America" the narrator successfully embeds characters' voices into his/her own utterances. For Eisenberg, polyphony comes naturally. She mixes the voices of the narrator, the characters, herself all in one story and constructs a truly dialogical environment. This seeming subversion of the writer's power, is productive and allows for more possibilities of interpretation; enabling freedom of assumption and perception for the reader while at the same time manifesting the views of an implied author.

Heteroglossia (of which billingsgate is the carnival jargon), and polyphony contribute to Eisenberg and Tower's verbal□ideological texture. With the use of different narratorial voices, dramatized characters and undramatized voices; dialects and speech styles, Eisenberg and Tower fulfil the first of several criteria that represent what it means for a work to be carnivalesque□the inversion of a traditional literary hierarchy. In a traditional literary work, the author creates and interprets the world depicted in the work from a position that is higher and qualitatively different from that of the characters (116). In Dostoevsky's works Bakhtin explains, the author occupies a position on the same plane with the characters and in dialogue with them. Bakhtin explains how Dostoevsky creates the polyphonic novel by repositioning the idea of the novel, its truth, within multiple and various consciousnesses rather than a single consciousness and by repositioning the author of the novel alongside the characters as one of these consciousnesses, creator of the characters but also their equal (Clark and Holquist 239–252). By implementing the diverse voices of the story, they give to these voices a sense of unity and harmony. If the collections were considered as a whole then these voices make a loud crowd and present a rich diversity of human voices and ideologies on one hand, which when collected, the particularized voices and ideologies become an echoing social protest against an estranged capitalist society.

5. Parody, Grotesque, Laughter: A Literary Inquiry into Bakhtinian Concepts in *Twilight of the Superheroes* and *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*

Many scholars have found the term grotesque realism to be the most proper term encompassing the grotesque images of the carnivalesque festivities that are intended to demean the high and the noble in a way that would inevitably provoke hilarious laughter. If such a definition is particularized, then it would be logical to say that grotesque realism deals with grotesque images, parody and laughter at its core. This part of the dissertation will consider the three core features of grotesque realism in relation to selected stories by Eisenberg and Tower and try to discover how the grotesque realism that Bakhtin wrote about is different from the grotesque realism of the 21st century. Such an inquiry will help in establishing the boundaries of the carnivalesque as a literary device in contemporary American short stories.

5.1 The Realm of Parody in *Twilight of the Superheroes* and *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*: Bakhtin vs. Hutcheon's Postmodern Parody

Parody is an integral element of the Menippean satire according to Bakhtin. For as much as parody is alien to epic or the tragedy, which Bakhtin refers to as pure genres, it is inherent to carnivalized genres. Bakhtin's carnival performs a parodic function on the level of social life and it is through parody that in both artistic and social expression heteroglossia and polyphony are achieved and the dialogic novel created. Parody, along with its parodic manifestations, is seen as a deliberate displacement and subversion of the ideological constraints of the system. The concept of parody which Bakhtin related as central to ancient and mediaeval times was a popular method to unmask official power. It is created when the "high" discourse is parodied by the "low" discourse, resulting in double voiced discourse. Parody must be, in a sense, bilingual, speaking with and against that which it is parodying. It must encompass that which it is parodying. According to Bakhtin, the true,

positive parody of earlier times was "free of nihilistic denial" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* p.55) and was not necessarily perceived by contemporaries as disrespectful. Bakhtin believed that this carnivalesque parody is quite different from "the negative and formal parody of modern times" which only denies without renewing (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 10–11). He depreciated the more modern usage of parody as opposed to his "carnivalesque" one:

> In modem times the functions of parody are narrow and unproductive. Parody has grown sickly, its place in modem literature is insignificant. We live, write and speak today in a world of free and democratized language: the complex and multi–leveled hierarchy of discourses, forms, images, styles that used to permeate the entire system of official language and linguistic consciousness was swept away by the linguistic revolution of the Renaissance (Hutcheon, "The Carnivalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Popular Culture and the Erotic", 9).

Linda Hutcheon would agree that modern parody is somewhat hypocritical as our ability to establish hierarchies of values, either aesthetic or social, with any sureness has disappeared. However, she also stresses that "no matter how democratized the contemporary texts may seem and no matter how subversive may contemporary literature seem of elitist, high–brow concepts of literature (we find comic books, Hollywood movies, popular songs, pornography, and so on being used in novels), these transgressions of literary and social norms remain legalized by the authority of the genre's elastic conventions" ("The Carnivalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Popular Culture and the Erotic", 5).

In order to understand the parodic nature of these stories within the constraints of the modern world, Linda Hutcheon's definition of post–modern parody, in which she argues that parody, as a technique of providing new contexts, "is a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text" ("Modern Parody and Bakhtin", 87) and further notes that parody is "extended repetition with critical difference" ("Modern Parody and Bakhtin", 89) will be exemplified and used as a guiding point in this part of the analysis. Since, in her treatment of parody, the notion of its liberating potential is implicit in the way that avant garde and other modern texts come to terms with '"cultural memories whose tyrannical weight they must overthrow by their incorporation and inversion of them" ("Modern Parody and Bakhtin", 87), her theory on parody will be juxtaposed to the Rabelaisian tradition embodied in Bakhtin's notion of

the carnivalesque as liberating, in this critical examination of the selected stories from the short story collections.

Although Hutcheon is quite careful when applying Bakhtin's concepts to contemporary culture, addressing them as being deeply rooted in the historical and social circumstances of his time, she feels that in discussing the particular case of the mediaeval carnival Bakhtin uncovered something that she believes to be underlying all parodic discourses and that is: the paradox of authorized transgression of norms. The social inversions and the parodic literary ones were both temporary transgressions and the laughter at their expense "was absolutely unofficial but nevertheless legalized" (*Rabelais and His World*, 89). This paradox of legalized through unofficial subversion is something all parodic discourses have in common, but it is also something seen as temporary, limited by conventions and "controlled by the confines authorized by the text parodied –that is, quite simply, within the confines dictated by recognisability" (*Rabelais and His World*, 24). That is to say, for Hutcheon, parody, as a modern form of self–reflexivity is in the eye of the beholder indeed, but even the beholder has to have some context to start from. Eisenberg's and Tower's discourses succeed in being parodic, in Hutcheon's sense, if the drives of the authors behind each story are known. That is, the stories are not simple narrations of the lives of the variety of characters in the America of the twenty–first century and the burdens that hang on them and which are so often depicted and characterized in critical reviews; these are narrations that subtly hide the attitudes towards George W. Bush's politics, the fear and insecurity of the September 11 attacks in New York, comments on the war in Iraq and observations on the so called "American dream life". Even more, these authors keep questioning the position of the individual in a consumeristic and capitalistic, money–driven "environment" and the latter's hostile attitudes towards members of the human kind who are depicted as products and thereby as victims of the society they so commonly refer to as a prime example of democracy.

Such parody that both Eisenberg and Tower employ is a way of subverting and transgressing their original roles as mediators and not commentators in the act of communication. They become active participants in the discussions on the topics they instigate. Hutcheon argues that the range that postmodern parody encompasses shows how this parody, "by ironic playing with multiple conventions, combines creative expression with critical commentary" (*A Theory of Parody*, 148). Its productive–creative approach to

tradition results in a modern recoding that establishes difference at the heart of similarity. Quite opposite to what Frederic Jameson says, that postmodern parody is no more than a symptom of the age, one way in which we have lost our connection to the past and to effective political critique, Hutcheon argues that "through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" ("Politics of Parody", 93).

In an article "Modern Parody and Bakhtin" Hutcheon claims that Joyce's *Ulysses* provides the most blatant example of the difference in both scope and intent of what she will label as parody of the twentieth century.

> There are extended parallels with the Homeric model on the level of character and plot, but these are parallels with an ironic difference; Molly/Penelope, waiting in her insular room for her husband, has remained anything but chaste in his absence. While the Odyssey is clearly the formally backgrounded or parodied text here, it is not one to be mocked or ridiculed; if anything, it is to be seen, as in the mock epic, as an ideal or at least as a norm from which the modern departs (87).

Parody is about using an existing work but in a different way. Its purpose is not to mock, but ironically comment on the previous work and somehow adjust it to the new contexts in which the new parodied text or work is created.

The title of Eisenberg's short story collection *Twilight of the Superheroes* is by itself already ironic enough. Just as Joyce used an ancient myth, and kept the same name, to show how the hero of the ancient times cannot be the hero we witness in modern times, Eisenberg may have used the title of a comic book that writer Alan Moore submitted to DC Comics in 1987 before his split with the company, for her short story collection to reflect similar ideas, mood and state of mind one finds when reading this comic book. Although various elements suggested by Moore later occurred in various comics, *Twilight* was never published and is considered a "lost work". The "framing device" involves heroes of the future attempting to warn the heroes of the past of what is happening, so that the heroes of the past (which is DC's present continuity) can try to prevent the disaster (humanity controlled by superheroes). The ironic inversion here is that Eisenberg uses the title and the resolution of the plot of the never published, but existing comic book to illustrate the world after September 11 in which superheroes, unlike in the comic, are powerless or doomed to inertness. The superheroes in America, characterized by ignorance and passivity by

Eisenberg, could stand for Americans in general/the humanity and their attitudes towards life, world, their country. They seem to be unaware of the situation in their homeland as well as in the world, flaccidly observing it as it is being ruined, failing to perceive that the power for change lies in their hands. Their motto seems to be "for as longs as I am ok, I don't really care about anything else". What came to replace the traditional "Alan Moore" superhero, therefore, is a man Eisenberg refers to as Passivityman:

> Passivityman is taking a snooze, his standard response to stress when the alarm rings....." Aw, is it really urgent?", he asks.
> "Don't you get it?" she says. "I've been warning you, episode after episode! And now, from his appliance–rich house on the Moon, Captain Corporation has tightened his Net of Evil around the planet Earth, and he's dragging it out of orbit! The U.S. Congress is selected by pharmaceutical companies, the state of Israel is run by Christian fundamentalists, the folks that haul toxic sludge manufacture cattle feed and process burgers, your source of news and information are edited by a giant mouse, New York City and Christian fundamentalism are holdings of a family in Kuwait–and all of it's owned by Captain Corporation!"
> Passivityman rubs his eyes and yawns. "Well gosh, Pru, sure–but, like, what am I supposed to do about it?"
> "I don't know, "Princess prudence says. "It's hardly my job to figure than one out, is it? I mean you're the superhero" (22).

Passivityman is one of the products of Nathaniel's mind. In an interview for *Bookninja* Eisenberg commented on Passivityman:

> I was really just thinking about how Nathaniel would portray his own characteristics in a comic book alter ego. Ultimately I realized that he would have spent a certain amount of energy in his life trying to rationalize or at least endure his passivity by reflecting – through however many veils of irony – on passivity's beneficial properties (Birrell).

Nathaniel, whom Emer Vaughn, a reviewer at the *Harvard Book Review* considers a copy of Benjamin Kunkel's Dwight Wilmerding, from *Indecision*, also speaks in the future about the events that took place in the past and can be compared to Rip Hunter from Allan Moore's comic. Is he also trying to warn past generations of the greater evils of the future as Rip Hunter is trying to warn his fellow super heroes in the comic by the same name not to do things that bring them closer to Twilight? "Twilight of the Superheroes" relates the events of September 11 with multiple portraits of American life (multiple American "superheroes")—an aging Midwestern immigrant couple, a post–college comic–strip artist and architect, an middle class native New Yorker with an art gallery—and tries to

differentiate between the psychological effects that the terrorist attacks had on these people. The twilight is important here, since it basically refers to the state of the mind that took over New Yorkers in Eisenberg's stories, making them believe that they have complete control over their lives. Ironically, this is the state not only many of Eisenberg's characters are in, but also the state in which many Americans are at the moment. Eisenberg comments on the state of the twilight in America:

> the anguishing amalgam of power and powerlessness that a citizen of the US lives with now. On the one hand the vote of each person here affects whole populations all over the planet and on the other hand there's nobody whom really, really a lot of us could feel even vaguely comfortable about voting for. We don't know how to alter or even influence the direction of this mammoth machine, even though we pay for it and, ostensibly, sit at its controls (Birrell).

Showing the state of "twilight" in which the characters of her stories find themselves trapped is surely one of the most profound characteristics of her writing. Twilight is a paradoxical situation, above all. Eisenberg investigates this paradox in which people believe they have control over their lives, and are constantly reassuring themselves in the correctness of their choices, but what is observed is how easily everything is slipping out of their control and how painful that realization is for them. The attacks of September 11 threw people in America off the track and made them question their values, their moral choices, but above all the life path they had chosen. It does not come as a coincidence then, that the first story in Eisenberg's volume talks exactly of that. Nathaniel's Uncle Lucien feels responsible for other people's pain and finds it unbearable: "He and even the most dissolute among his friends have glided through their lives on the assumption that the sheer fact of their existence has in some way made the world a better place" (24). Lucien, as other Americans, felt that he did his duty as a citizen by donating to charity and being broadminded, but nothing can make up for what happened, "They voted responsibly, they gave to charity, they read their paper arduously. And while they were basking in their exclusive sunshine, what had happened to the planet?" (18). Questions and contemplations of this sort persist throughout the collection only to reach a peak in the closing story "The Flaw in the Design". Here, Lucien's regret re–emerges in a college–age boy as rage and suicidal guilt. Oliver was raised in the poor countries that his father's company was mining, drilling and exploiting. Now he can't stand his father or himself. "Every breath I

take is a theft," (220) he tells his mother. Such a mood of guilt and maybe to some extent horror of one's own life is present in all the stories in the collection.

In "Some Other, Better Otto", the protagonist took things for granted, basically believing that this life he has, was what he deserved to have, and that all the pretty, expensive, extravagant things he surrounded himself with are dignified by his persona. The end of the twilight of his blurred mind comes when he is asked by one of his sisters to try to persuade their mentally ill sister Sharon to attend Christmas dinner. That is when guilt takes over:

> Why did he need so many things in his life, Otto wondered; why did all these things have to be so special? Special, beautiful plates; special, beautiful furniture; special, beautiful everything. And all that specialness, it occurred to him, intended only to ensure that no one – especially himself – could possibly underestimate his value. Yet it actually served to illustrate how corroded he was, how threadbare his native resources, how impoverished his discourse with everything that lived and was human (56–57).

It appears as though Otto has it all, a life partner, William, who loves him patiently and persistently, satisfying work and good friends. However, it is his schizophrenic sister Sharon, both blessed and cursed by an otherworldly intelligence, who makes him start questioning his life philosophy, forcing him to search for meaning and examine his many motivations. Eisenberg has a comment for what Otto felt:

> And all this of course is inextricable from the relentless materialism that's cultivated in regard to every area of life here. Our psyches have been truly conquered by the need to acquire and own, or rather by a terror of not acquiring or owning – a terror that's cultivated from birth on. I can't say I'm much of an exception to this terror, so I understand it pretty well from the inside. But because owning is considered evidence of merit, is in fact conflated with merit, we who are able to own are very easily pressed into service as sort of drones for (very) big business. That is, the premise is that if we have stuff we must deserve it, and we must therefore be morally unimpeachable (Birrell).

The paradox is that all these people seem to assume they have a complete life and moreover complete control over it, thinking they are the ones in charge of it, but it is in one episode, one sudden outburst, an epiphanic moment if one prefers, that the characters literally stop for a moment and revise their life, realizing the situation is quite the opposite. People are hopeless and powerless individuals, and above all passive inhabitants, of a world run by corporations, pharmaceutical companies and other atrocities of modern

political system Eisenberg would agree. This is a parodic situation, where life is literally mocking its inhabitants, who seem to be too pretentious:

> People, in my part of the world, at least, tend to overestimate the degree of control they have over their lives, and their freedom of choice. Though at the same time, people so rarely imagine and initiate alternatives! A paradox. I think often that "choice" is retrospective – that you find yourself doing something and you believe that's what you've chosen to do, that your actions are the result of a decision, or at least that they're rational in some way (Birrell).

Imitative parody with the intent to critique or comment is not unfamiliar to Wells Tower as well. His debut collection was inspired by the quotation he found while reading written accounts of a Viking siege of a British town, and went something like, "When the Vikings showed up, everything ravaged, everything burned." For the *New Yorker,* Wells admits that:

> I did do some haphazard research for that story. The really gross stuff in there—like the blood eagle—is, I think, for the most part true. I found these books about Viking life, and used the most ugly bits. (La Force).

So the title of the book, which functions as an apt descriptor for the underlying themes that most of these stories explore, also functions as the title of the final story in the collection. This story tells us about a Viking raid, but apart from that it gives insights into the extreme violence they supposedly used and stereotypical presuppositions as to their doings in the land of the enemy. Tower used historical facts about Vikings to create this story about their savagery. But what he also did is ironically comment on the current times in America.

As discussed in the previous chapter, this story is supposed to parallel current times. Quite different from "Teen Sniper", which comments on current affairs from a futuristic viewpoint, this story uses a different period of time to critique modern times. The Vikings, of course, are really Americans who are invading a small country for no "apparent" reason. Like Vikings, so are Americans considered as randomly violent, tough, and dangerous, both locally and globally.

Tower also frequently draws his characters from his personal experiences. Building a character on the basis of personal experiences, but in different contexts, can be seen as yet another way of reconstructing with the purpose of ironic comment. Bob from "The Brown Coast" is not just a random character Tower. For *Bookslut,* Tower says:

> You know, that story was inspired by a guy I knew from my town, a bartender — he was also a carpenter — who told this story of having an aquarium and screwing it up with a poisonous slug that killed everything. And I got the setting from a trip that I took with my girlfriend at the time to the Gulf Coast, where there turned out to be no beaches, just all this smelly mud.
> I think in the beginning I thought that if I had a good anecdote, I could have a story. That sort of worked at first, but it obviously needed to go further (Varno).

This story recreates a character that has no job, has cheated on his wife, is dirty and messy and he is creating his own aquarium. Tower presents this character in a bad, yet funny way to his readers. The grotesque images at the beginning of the story that portray Bob as an untidy, careless, even dirty man mock his ridiculously neglected appearance. However, the final images are a sort of a mimicry, where Tower points out that judgment of all kinds with respect to this man should be withheld, since life is so unpredictable and you never know whether a poisonous (metaphorically) slug might just end up in your lap. So, although this story evokes laughter, it warns us to be careful about what and at whom we are laughing at:

> Claire and Derrick returned the smile and wagged their hands. And Bob Munroe was smiling too, even as he dropped back his arm and, with a loose–limbed underhand stroke, lofted the slug into the blue–gold morning sea. It was a good, soaring toss, and it might have dropped the creature into the pretty young woman's lap had not a surge of warm wind rolled off the land and pushed the sailboat of the shore (27).

At times, more than parodic, both Eisenberg and Tower are being ironic in relation to their characters or specific situations. Eisenberg is being ironic in "Twilight" when discussing Y2K. Nathaniel is trying to impress the anxiety he experienced over the Y2K issue to his grandchildren, an anxiety that abruptly seemed foolish in retrospect:

> Everyone was thinking of more and more alarming possibilities. Some people committed their last night on this earth to partying, and others rushed around buying freeze–dried provisions and cases of water and flashlights and radios and heavy blankets in the event that the disastrous problem might somehow eventually be solved……But the amazing thing, Nathaniel will tell his grandchildren, was that nothing happened! We held our breath….And there was nothing! It was a miracle. Over the face of the earth, from east to west again, nothing catastrophic happened at all (5).

In " Like It or Not", Kate, apart from ridiculing Harry and his pretentious nature (shown to some extent in a section about polyphony), is being ironic when describing how customers in a restaurant really look:

> The dining room was an aerie, a bower, hung with a playful lattice of garlands. Its white tile flowers were adorned with painted baskets of fruit, and there were real ones scattered here and there on stands. But even as the waiters glided by with trays of glossy roasted vegetables and platters of fish, even while Harry took it upon himself to order for her, knowledgeably and solicitously, Kate felt tainted. Despite the room's conceit that eating was a pastime for elves and fairies, Mrs. Reitz's carnality had disclosed the truth: this aggregation of hairy vertebras, scrubbed, scented, prancing about on hind legs, was ruthlessly bent on physical gratifications–tactile, visual, gustatory, genital…The candles! The flowers! A trough providing mass feedings for naked guests would be less pornographic (110).

Tower is ironic in relation to Bob and his life situation. He is further being ironic in relation to his narrator protagonist Ed, from "Down Through the Valley" who believes he can have a friendly relationship with his cheater wife and her newest boyfriend. Moreover, in Wild America, the narrator seems to be ironic in relation to Maya and the way she feels that the city where her cousin lives is just too boring and lame for a girl like her:

> Though this would probably be the last summer interlude the cousins would share, Maya had shown insultingly little interest in spending time with Jacey. Here were the things Maya had so far declined to do with her cousin: go ice skating at the mall, see a movie, attend a secret beer party two neighbourhoods over, shop, and watch the volunteer fire department light a derelict house on fire and hose it out. Maya seemed to regard all the attractions of greater Charlotte as a tiresome backwoods dullness–this from someone whose hometown consisted of railroad tracks, two dozen hicks and craftsfolk, and some dogs. What could you do from a person like that? (153).

Parody is seen as inevitably connected to irony, and according to Hutcheon parody and irony have been used for the articulation of an effective counter–discourse. She considers a couple of different examples of this parodic counter–discourse:

> The feminist and the postcolonial, for instance, counter–discourses were meant to seek and destroy the dominants. Toni Morrison wrote back ironically to the Bible as much as to William Faulkner in her novel *Song of Solomon*. In his award–winning play, *M. Butterfly*, David Henry Hwang took a true story and retold it through the parodic lens of Puccini's opera, *Madame Butterfly.* Thomas King's native parodies of everything from Genesis to John Wayne Hollywood movies, in his novel *Green Grass, Running Water*, were matched by the ironized versions of canonized Western paintings by Canadian Jim Logan in his "Classical Aboriginal

> Series". North American culture, however, was not alone in this kind of ideologically motivated parody. South African novelist J.M. Coetzee rewrote Daniel Defoe's Ur–text of capitalism and Protestantism, *Robinson Crusoe*, by retelling the desert island rescue story from the point of view of an absented and silenced woman and refusing to retell it from the point of view of Friday, the forcefully silenced African (no longer a South Sea islander, as in Defoe's text). Countless Caribbean and African writers over the last 50 years have rewritten Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, ironically de–colonizing its story of imperialism and subjugation. Salman Rushdie transgressively borrowed (or stole) everything from Bollywood movies to Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* to fashion an idiosyncratically ironic and historical account of postcolonial India. What has come to be called Queer theory (and practice) is in a sense a combination of gay and lesbian theorizing and this postmodern–influenced feminist and post–colonial emphasis on irony as an oppositional discursive strategy and parody as a way to embed (and contest) history in art ("Introduction: There will always be parody and irony", 7–11).

The kind of postmodern deconstruction, which builds up on previous historical sources with the purpose of comment on modern times, is central to postmodern parody, including its sister irony, or more properly ironic inversion; and as such it has been, at times, applied in these selected short stories. The characters in their stories want to be heard, as do both Tower and Eisenberg who are making authorial comments on modern issues in America. Hutcheon says that:

> The double–talking natures of irony and parody do not only signify a duplicity to be distrusted as insincere today; for many they represent a way to talk back to authority, to subvert from within, to be heard (because they use the dominant's discourses, even if against itself) ("Introduction: There will always be parody and irony", 7–11).

5.1.1 Merging of the Two Theories in Eisenberg and Tower's Work

Since parody occurs in almost all forms of art in the postmodern world, Hutcheon believes that the broadening of the very term parody would be appropriate for the twentieth century in order "to fit the needs of the art of our century, and art that implies another and somewhat different concept of textual appropriation" (*A Theory of Parody,* 92). Such a broadening of the term has been carried out with Bakhtin's theory of parody in this dissertation, mainly by merging Hutcheon's view of postmodern parody with Bakhtin's

carnivalesque "mock" parody. The carnivalesque parody as presented by Bakhtin has been modified and incorporated into the theory of postmodern parody as defined by Linda Hutcheon to better suit today's needs of analysis. If a closer, more direct look is taken the two similarities are obvious:

Hutcheon's theory of parody:

- Parody implies mimicry not necessarily mockery
- Parody infuses repetition in different contexts
- Parody signals that present representations come from the past ones and implies different ideological consequences (Tower's EREB)
- Parody does not disregard the context of past representations but uses irony to acknowledge that we are inseparably connected to the past
- Parody assumes our critique, not nostalgia about the past and it questions and challenges the dominant ideology to construct another
- "parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" (*Politics*, 101); however, this position does not mean that the critique is not effective

Bakhtin's carnivalesque parody:

- Parody is a field for a clash of voices parody's polyphonic nature (contains voice of the parody and the voice of the original subject)
- Parody involves ridiculing or mocking the dominant voice
- Parody serves the purpose of broadening one person's typical way of seeing, his or her work (responding to a literary work), deepest principles etc.
- Parody is always "bilingual" (it speaks with and against what it is parodying)
- Parody always provokes laughter and is always seen as something positive rather than negative

The differences that might be observed are connected to the level of mockery and the level of laughter. While for Bakhtin parody always exerts laughter and mockery, for

Hutcheon the absence of laughter is possible. A focus on the absence or presence of laughter in these stories will be discussed in the section about the grotesque.

As for similarities, there appear to be many. However, when we summarize what Bakhtin has said about the carnival in general and how he made a connection between carnivalized genres and Menippean satire in his *Problematics of the Dostoevsky's Poetics*, it might be observed that the main principle of the Menippean satire, the testing of a philosophical idea, and not human character, which is, according to Bakhtin, also reflected in the carnivalesque atmosphere, bears a close resemblance to the purpose of the parody in literary and other terms in the post modern world as defined by Hutcheon. Therefore, it might just be possible that Bakhtin did not form his definition of parody as well as he could have (sometimes it seems oversimplified), but that the ideas were certainly there, and that what Hutcheon did was somehow to fill the void in Bakhtin's theory of parody concerning the very rationale of the parody in literary works in contemporary times.

If a description of the parody that Eisenberg and Tower use is needed then it would be defined as following: Parody that appears in stories by Eisenberg and Tower is a literary device with which the writer can expose his or her own ideological issues by contrasting them or comparing them to a relevant already existing work, which does not have to be literature. It could be a situation, an occasion etc., for the purpose of commenting on current affairs to the readers and the characters themselves, who also serve as the principal creators of the parodic context. The parody created here is not mockery but a way of mimicry by discussion.

In Tower and Eisenberg's works parody has thus been used for the purpose of discussing a certain subject matter. The significance of such a statement lies in the fact that these authors have on one hand reached an ideological separation from the themes they are writing about, and therefore proved a role to yet another voice in Bakhtin's theory of dialogization and freedom expressed by the carnivalesque, but they have also managed to implement their own ideological observations about the subject in question, functioning as only one of the participants in a discussion that has been going on for some time and about which much has been written before.[2]

[2] When it comes to Tower's work, it is only right to say that it embodies the Bakhtinian parody as well. Since, the grotesque images are a means of conveying parody for Bakhtin, more on this type of parody will be commented in the section about the use of grotesque in Tower's short stories.

5.2 Grotesque Images of the Carnivalesque: Rethinking Bakhtin, Kayser and Harpham

Grotesque images are depicted by the language that is used during the carnival. These are the images, created through language, that stress the human body and physical function; eating, drinking and getting drunk, defecation and sexual actions. Carnival stresses Bakhtin, celebrates the bodily life like fertility, growth, and a brimming–over abundance. Such an atmosphere creates language that is formed in specific situations of unofficial communication. In particular, the language of carnival uses a set of symbols which may have much in common with the images of the lower bodily stratum. These images are severely grotesque and function as a way for describing hidden aspects of reality. The grotesque is a way of confronting the fears the society feels and accepting these fears as normal and integral parts of the community. Grotesque realism features the human body as over or undersized, incomplete and defecated. "It is an image of impure corporeal bulk with its orifices (mouth, flared nostrils, anus) yawning wide and its lower regions (belly, legs, feet, buttocks, and genitals) given priority over its upper regions (head, spirit, reason)" (Stallybrass and White, 280). Such an image of grotesque realism is always in process, it is hybrid and outgrowing all limits, unfinished and represents a figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggerations and inversion:

> Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development, or more correctly speaking, two links shown at the point where they enter into each other. This especially strikes the eye in archaic grotesque (*Rabelais and His World*, 26).

But while Bakhtin's reading emphasizes the positive and celebratory implications of Rabelais's overt treatment of physicality, the notion of the grotesque has some different implications for Wolfgang Kayser and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, who offer varied and

extensive accounts of the development and the presence of the grotesque in the modern period. According to Kayser, "Grotesque art can be defined as art whose form and subject matter appear to be a part of, while contradictory to, the natural, social, or personal worlds of which we are a part. Its images most often embody distortions, exaggeration, and fusion of incompatible parts" (28). For Kayser, the grotesque is realized in three ways. Firstly, he saw the grotesque as an estranged world:

> For viewed from the outside, the world of the fairy tale could also be regarded as strange and alien. Yet its world is not estranged, that is to say, the elements in it which are familiar and natural to us do not suddenly turn out to be strange and ominous. It is our world which has to be transformed. Suddenness and surprise are essential elements of the grotesque. The grotesque instils fear of life rather than fear of death. Structurally, it presupposes that the categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable (185).

This estranged world, instilling fear and bitterness, does not make room for laughter. Laughter is only possible, in a Kayserian context, as satiric, hellish or even demonic, but never liberating or festive as it is for Bakhtin. Furthermore, Kayser sees the grotesque as "the play with the absurd" (184–185). For as long as this play might seem harmless, no one is sure of the dangers that lurk and await to harvest their victims. This brings us to the third realization of the grotesque according to Kayser, that the grotesque is "an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (185). For Kayser, the grotesque invokes these demonic, dark aspects of the world, and as such creates possibilities for fighting against them and subduing them. However, as Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia concludes, "Kayser provides no clues as to how liberation can be achieved and indeed appears to see the mere standing up to opposition as the victory itself" (149).

In spite of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces which lurk in and behind our world and have the power to estrange it, the artistic portrayal of the "dark" grotesque as provided by Kayser has occupied critics for years and its aspects can be noticed in the works of contemporary authors as well. There are, however, many noticeable differences in Bakhtin and Kayser's view of the grotesque. Kayser's satanistic laughter is the only one possible in such an estranged, devilish world, whereas Bakhtin's laughter is positive, created in a festive atmosphere. Bakhtin believed that laughter is inherently connected to the grotesque body and its main operating mode is parody. This laughter that signalled rebirth through the grotesque is always positive and liberating, universal in

scope; it is directed at all and everyone. But it is also triumphant and joyful, yet bitter as the participants know it is not long lasting:

> Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it….. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it….. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. As it draws an object to itself and makes it familiar, laughter delivers the objet into the fearless hands of investigative experiment – both scientific and artistic – and into the hands of free experimental fantasy. Familiarization of the world through laughter and popular speech is an extremely important and indispensable step in making possible free, scientifically knowable and artistically realistic creativity in European civilization. This (comic humorous representation) is the zone of maximally familiar and crude contact; laughter means abuse, and abuse could lead to blows. Basically this is uncrowning, that is, the removal of an object from the distanced plane, the destruction of epic distance, an assault on and destruction of the distanced plane in general (*The Dialogic Imagination, 23*).

For Bakhtin, laughter was also one of the things that enabled dialogization and the full realization of equal participation on behalf of the characters and the author. Laughter or humour, if Bakhtin's assumptions are followed, is a rhetorical form with which the uncommon (hierarchically superior) is made common, ordinary. In other words, laughter has the power of destroying the barrier between the untouchable and the common, thus opening a plane for discussion with the untouchable. Kayser's view of laughter is directly opposite to Bakhtin's: "Laughter originates on the comic and caricatural fringe of the grotesque. Filled with bitterness, it takes on characteristics of the mocking, cynical, and ultimately satanic laughter while turning into grotesque" (26).

Concerning the scope of the grotesque, although it has to do more with physical malformations, Bakhtin's grotesque does not seem to be limited by that aspect alone, contrary to Kayser who focused mainly on the psychological aspect of the dark grotesque. Furthermore, Bakhtin believes grotesque to be created in a fearless, all–enduring temporary world, and quite unlike Kayser, grotesque realism has a liberating effect. Bakhtin's grotesque which is a clear literary representation of the folk culture and as Hannu Riikonen has pointed out in "Menippean satire: some Bakhtinian aspects" , the

down to earthiness is where he radically differs from Wolfgang Kayser who claims that the grotesque expresses the fear of life and the fear of death. Bakhtin's folk have the desire to enjoy life to the full; there is no fear of life itself in them, Hannu Riikonen said, although some aspects of their current situation may terrify them (quoted in Joki, 87). In opposition to Kayser's limited view, Bakhtin offered his own historical survey of the importance and influence of the grotesque:

> Kayser's theory cannot be applied to the thousand–year–long development of the pre–Romantic era: that is, the archaic and antique grotesque (for instance, the satiric drama or the comedy of Attica) and the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, linked to the culture of folk humour….Kayser's definitions……strike us by gloomy, terrifying tone of the grotesque world that alone the author sees. In reality gloom is completely alien to the entire development of this world up to the romantic period. We have already shown that the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, filled with spirit of the carnivals, liberates the world from all that is dark and terrifying; it takes away all fears and is therefore completely gay and bright. Fear is the extreme expression of narrow–minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter (*Rabelais and His World*, 46).

As far as Geoffrey Harpham is concerned, he tried to establish the true "nature" of the grotesque to prevent its menacing tendency of becoming no more than a term accommodating all sorts of disorders and contradictions. He is mentioned in this analysis because he basically compared the two main currents of the grotesque, that of Kayser and that of Bakhtin, only to dismiss them both in the end. Harpham felt that Bakhtin was, all in all, overemphasising the positive and the productive side of the grotesque realism to the point of creating utopia, whereas Kayser, because he was so revolted by our world, did not assert any other characteristic to the grotesque but devilish, evil and negative ones (Biscaia, 164–165). Harpham was right in both cases, however, for as much as Bakhtin really did stress the positive and fruitful aspect not just of the grotesque but of the carnival principle itself, he also talked about that negative aspect which basically gave birth to something as positive as the grotesque is. Harpham saw Bakhtin's grotesque realism as a complete denial of fear, which is not completely true, considering the fact that Bakhtin believed the carnival, this other world in which reality is grotesque, only comes to existence with the direct realization of the other, fearful, hegemonic world people of the Middle Ages had been living in. When comparing Kayser and Bakhtin's view of the grotesque, it might be concluded that Kayser presents a narrowed viewpoint of the grotesque, one that focused on horror, fear and disgust, a somewhat gloomy character that

Bakhtin attributes to Romantic times. This completely contradicts the highly festive, cheery and positive grotesque of the Middle Ages. The grotesque during the Romantic period seems then as the one that enacts fear and makes people feel weak and stupid. Bakhtin's grotesque contrasts with the one that is filled with laughter that empowers and enriches. A similar view is shared by Victor Hugo, who in 1820, introduced his interpretation of the grotesque. His definition of what the grotesque is relies on the classic Greek and Roman antiquity that defined the grotesque as a monstrous, yet comic entity. Hugo stated, "the grotesque is everywhere: on one hand, it creates the formless and the terrifying, on the other hand the comic, the buffon–like" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 43). But although Bakhtin studied mainly the positive physical malformations as the essential subject matter of the grotesque, whereas Kayser focused more on the psychological aspect alone, and Hugo on its ambivalent aesthetic nature, Flannery O'Connor remarked that "the literary grotesque is created mainly through perspective and compositional rendering rather than through subject matter per se" (Goodwin, 173). What is essential in the investigation of the modern grotesque, it seems, is the extent to which grotesque images, seen as hideous, paradoxical devices, are used to deviate from a specific social entity and redefine the marginal as the mainstream.

The grotesque in contemporary American life is mostly connected to popular culture and its establishments like talk shows, celebrity gossip, network reality programs, internet or tabloids. Flannery O'Connor noticed that the problem for a serious writer of the grotesque is "one of finding something that is *not* grotesque" (Goodwin, 1). The utterance dates from 1950, but commenting on American mass culture is even of greater importance today. The "grotesque" is not in Eisenberg's vocabulary but for the purpose of this analysis grotesque representations, both physical and compositional will also be referred to in her fiction. Also, since postmodern critics have usually chosen to deal with the grotesque dualities in literature by creating a synthesis of Kayser and Bakhtin's theories, the notion of grotesque will not only be analyzed in a Bakhtinian sense alone (since it seems impossible, as grotesque has become more or less a daily occurrence), but will incorporate some aspects of the grotesque as envisioned by Kayser, mainly the dark and humourless side of it.

5.2.1 The Gruesome Grotesque of Tower's Fiction

Tower's stories are a fruitful ground for research into the grotesque. The grotesque images he employs in his stories are basically Bakhtinian images with a Kayserian outcome. By that, I mean that he focuses on gruesome imaging of the body, specific bodily actions, revolting scents etc., but not for the purpose of provoking positive laughter but rather a tragic sigh and disgust. That is not to say his writing is not humourless; he does infuse it with some giddy, well–humoured sentences, but on the whole his fiction is more darkly than lightly grotesque, and he himself admits to the *Times* of having "grotesque impulses in fiction" (Oltermann). "I take pleasure in the grotesque. Even if critics told me to write an elegant, well–mannered book about elderly women sitting down and reflecting on their lives, I couldn't do it" (Oltermann).

There are many images in Tower's short story collection that are highly grotesque. In "Wild America" a cat brings in a dead bird that looks like "a half–cooked eraser with dreams of someday becoming a prostitute" (151). Further in the story, a grotesque description of Jacey can be noticed as she is presented as a girl "with a shiny chin and forehead and a figure like a pickle jar," quite opposite to her cousin Maya who is a "five–foot–ten–inch mantis of legendary poise and ballet repute" (152). In this story there are many humorous, rather grotesque descriptions as well, especially of Jacey's first supposed "nude movements with a boy" (163).

> Last summer at a coeducational overnight camp in Tennessee, she wound up in a tent with a boy from New Jersey, also thirteen at the time. He went at her. His wooing was a literal impersonation of the ardent French skink, Pepe Le Pew. Miraculously, this had resulted both in Jacey's first kiss and her first mostly nude movements with a boy. For technical reasons, she had not wholly "given up the rock", as Eileen Gutch liked to describe the act. If she had to put a finger on it, Jacey supposed she'd given up the rock by about forty percent (163).

The most crystallized, intriguing moment of disillusionment in "Wild America," is when Jacey ventures into the woods with Leander because of an argument with her cousin Maya and her supposed boyfriend Leander. She runs into the forest and encounters a stranger drinking beer by the river. The scene escalates as she agrees to get in his car, where he molests her.

> Quick leaned over the emergency brake and put his mouth on Jacey's, not as gently as before. He drove his tongue through her teeth and put the palm of his damaged hand against the front of her shorts, moving it with painful force, as though trying to rouse enough sensation for his deaf nerves to feel. Nausea gathered in Jacey's belly. She was sure she was going to vomit or yell, but to humiliate herself in front of the older man seemed an agony at least as bad (180).

Such is the situational grotesque, where Tower seems to be at his best. Repugnance is felt and disgust is present when reading this segment of the story, similar feelings one might expect to encounter when Bakhtinian grotesque is in question, however with one great difference; Tower's grotesque situations are not comic, rather, they are tragic.

In "On the Show", scenes of the grotesque are omnipresent. One of the main characters, Jeff Park, leaves his mother's Florida home after a violent fight with his new stepfather. He joins the freakish, grotesque world of carnies, working on the Pirate Ship ride where a young boy is molested in a portable toilet and a stoned worker is collecting coins that fall from people's pockets on the spinning Zipper ride:

> Leon is a giant, with a head like a fire hydrant and palms the size of dinner plates. The night's heat stokes the psoriasis reddening his arms, and he sits in the doghouse, rasping at his rash with a shingle–thick nail so that the sloughing fall on the black metal of the ride's control panel. Leon is sixty–three, and because he's had three heart attacks, he is sober except for bear. For nostalgia's sake, he pauses now and then to mound the dead skin into a line and guesses at its cash value if the skin were good cocaine (191).

Another carnie worker comments on Randy's mother Sheila Cloatch, with whom Jim Lemmons, Henry's father is on a date. Ellis is a stereotypical carnie worker and his voice has been given a certain authenticity. He uses dirty language and remarks that are disgusting and grotesque in full:

> The engines engage. The men stand together on the deck's upper tier, watching the fan of Sheila Cloatch's hair blurring with the swing of the ship.
> "Blond to the bone, "says Ellis. " I'd eat her whole damn child just to taste the he squeezed out of" (199).

"On the Show" is a story enhanced with details and descriptions. Tower writes how the sky "glows hyena brown" as egrets take flight over a drainage canal (187). A lizard, a "Florida anole, cocked on the shoulder of the propane tank beside the service window, slips down the tank's enamel face into a crescent of deep rust" (187). The surface of the rusting tank makes the lizard change its colour, but it's a trick. "Against the lizard's belly, the rust's

soothing friction offers an illusion of heat, and the lizard's hide goes from the color of a new leaf to the colour of a dead one" (187). This colourful cinematic opening serves as a wonderful introduction into a story that actually centers on the molestation of a young boy: After searching for his son for twenty minutes, Jim Lemmons finally finds him:

> Henry doesn't say much about what happened to him in the privy, but he says enough. Jim isn't sure about the story. In his heart, he believes Henry is a dishonest boy, that his beauty has made him as vindictive and conniving as a movie star. Little fistfuls of coins go missing from Jim's change jar when Henry comes over. On their last visit, Henry claimed a rattlesnake wagged its tail at him through the sink drain and he begged to go back to his mother's. He wouldn't give up the lie all weekend, even when Jim spanked him for it. Jim would suspect the boy of lying now, of deliberately trying to ruin his date. But Henry is missing his underwear and one of his shoes, which gives the story a bad ring of truth (194).

From the extract, readers can conclude the boy has been molested, but Jim seems to be hesitant. He actually questions his son's honesty and even enumerates all the times his son has lied to him before. The father feels somehow estranged from the boy, from this world that the boy presents (molestation, sick minds) and the whole atmosphere is one of unease. The element of estrangement functions quite well in his stories and it certainly seems to represent one of the estranged grotesque worlds Kayser was wrote about. Also, this is the only scene that Tower only hints at the violent act, but does not depict it literally.

Tower not only portrays the grotesque, he creates this inverted, or estranged atmosphere, similar to the southern gothic and Flannery O'Connor's style whom he admires greatly. In "Down Through the Valley," a man named Ed, is forced to take a long car ride with his young daughter, Marie, and his wife Jane's new lover, Barry.

> The sky was going dark, when Marie bent over in her seat and did a strange thing. She leaned her head down and put her lips on the gearshift. She got the whole thing in her mouth and it stretched her jaw open all the way. A ribbon of slobber slid down onto the gear boot and twinkled in the green glow of the dashboard." Her father, repulsed, tries to pull her off. "It's all right, Ed," says Barry (100).

The atmosphere Tower creates in this story is one of unease and the reader is surprised with such a revelation as much as Ed seems to be with his daughter's behaviour. Clearly, the child's manoeuvre resembles oral sex and the readers are probably shocked with her behaviour. Alarmed at the weirdness and danger of this behaviour, Ed tries to get his daughter to stop, only to have his ex–wife's boyfriend undercut his parental authority by countering, "Jane and I let her do that on long trips. The vibrations relax her" (100).

Typical of the disconcerting world Tower paints, the story builds from barely civil behaviour to an explosion of violence.

The title story does not talk about Tower's usual contemporary American characters from a "rougher" class. It merely functions as a kind of a high peak of the grotesque aesthetic in the form of an overt statement. The Viking violence is striking, the cruelty is magnificent in description. Djarf Fairhair functions as an embodiment of pure legendary violence: He eats food out of dead men's stomachs, clubs people with severed legs, strides across the shoulders of enemy armies lopping heads off, and is the one to perform the "blood eagle," described in the previous chapter (228). The only ones who are trying to withhold themselves from violence are Harald and his friends. The grotesque ritual and the repulsive wrongdoings of the Vikings are neither humorous nor positive in a Bakhtinian sense. Naturally, it seems fun to some Vikings, but others are actually horrified by it, by the unnecessary exertion of violence. Harald fears for his family, afraid that their wrongdoings will come to haunt them and a similar destiny as hit the village they attacked might just be awaiting for them.

> You wish you hated those people, your wife and children, because you know the things the world will do to them, because you have done some of those things yourself. It's crazy–making, yet you cling to them with everything and close your eyes against the rest of it. But still you wake up late at night and lie there listening for the creak and splash of oars, the clank of steel, the sounds of men rowing toward your home (238).

Tower's Americans are not such freaks like O'Connor's, but they are freaks in spirit: "depressed rednecks, failed entrepreneurs, bitter carnies, bullied children and men on the run" (Thompson, "Fellow Freaks"). Tower's characters and their grotesque appearances, behaviour and mood provide the regenerating power of the grotesque Bakhtin wrote about. The grotesque's positive and the regenerating role, is to cast value systems or norms in a critical light; make discrepancies visible; seek a reality that is larger than the actual, which is closed in by norms; and overcome contrasts between the intellect and the sensations. It seems that Tower's characters, their behaviour and most of all their language usurp the rules prescribed by a modern, "democratic" American society, enabling Tower to criticize the rigidity of American life in the 21st century and the way that one is directly looked upon as a loser, a weirdo, if they do not comply to society's norms of moral conduct. Moreover, for Tower the use of the grotesque has the purpose of showing people as they

are in all their twistedness, if it is implied. And while some grotesque images Tower employs in his stories are humorous at the moment of reading, they abruptly become sad and dark. The menace and the horror that are also an integral to Tower's stories are anchored in a kind of everydayness. This does not come as a surprise, considering that one of Tower's favourite writers is John Cheever, who also made extraordinary literature out of the ordinary.

5.2.2 Deborah Eisenberg and the Absence of the Grotesque

When Eisenberg's stories are thoroughly analyzed in the search for the grotesque, the outcome would be simple: Eisenberg does not use the grotesque. She does not disgust her readers with heavy descriptions of a cat tormenting a pigeon, or of Viking savagery, or of pimpled teenagers. Eisenberg uses a more sophisticated style of writing. In all of her stories the images are not as striking as Tower's may sometimes be, but they are powerful and expressive. She needs not use a lot of words, but the ones she does use tend to paint quite a clear picture. For example, while Tower would probably enhance the aesthetic of violence, Eisenberg tries to hide it, showing only as much as is needed for the story to make sense. Moreover, it seems that Eisenberg especially tries hard to hint at this violence, making the characters and the readers aware of its existence, but also making them dismiss it as unlikely until it actually happens. Before Kristina felt a sudden punch in her face, she was already nervous about asking Eli to go along on road with him:

> Look, I've got to go away tomorrow for a few days, Eli said. But Liz will come over during the days and help…..Can't we come?
> No, you cannot come.
> Why not?
> Why not? It goes without saying why not.
> She was twisting one of Noah's little T–shirts in her hands, she realized. But maybe I could be helpful…..She looked at him, but he was sealed up tight. But don't send Liz at least please….If you are worried about us, we could go and stay with Nonie and Munsen.
> With Nonie and Munsen, he said. Would you be happier there?
> It's just– she was saying, and then all she really remembers is her surprise, as if his fists were a brand new part of his body.
> A little blood was coming from somewhere; she'd felt something on her face, then checked her hand. There was some blood in her mouth too. Was that tooth going to come out? she'd wondered idly.

> She heard the bare branches clacking together outside in a slight breeze. Then he picked her up from where she'd fallen back (167).

The scene lasts only for a second, but it reverberates long after. Kristina's thoughts are what makes this moment memorable. Again, nature is used to complement her feelings in the form of the sound of the branches clacking, settling down from a storm.

Nothing in this story, nor in other stories in this collection, can be considered to be darkly grotesque or even grotesque in Bakhtinian sense. There are no glorifications of the lower bodily stratum, there are no defecations or other disgusting rituals which aim at making what was not ordinary, ordinary; making even the most exalted men and women be seen as human like the rest of the people. But that is not needed in Eisenberg's stories. The level of intimacy the characters provide, through the inner dialogues or the direct address to the reader, makes it that much easier to relate the characters to the middle–aged reader. The situation is maybe slightly different with Tower. It is rather more difficult to identify with his "rough" characters, coming from a "lower" social class than those of either Eisenberg or the typical reader of literary fiction. In that case, the approximation of the characters to the ordinary, through the grotesque descriptions, might make sense. That is, Bakhtin saw the grotesque body as originating in folk culture, there it was closer to the ordinary folk. Also, he felt that by stressing the grotesque during the times of the carnival, the people would familiarize with each other and realize their equal status, at least temporarily. Considering that the majority of characters, settings and life situations Tower describes come from personal experience, it might be concluded that one of his goals with this short story collection was to report rather than narrate, about realistic people with realistic problems. And as it seems the grotesque is a part of their everyday life.

Unlike many other female writers who have used the grotesque to propose a new set of meanings to make female protagonist the central of the work, point in their direction and empowering the female, like Angela Carter, Eisenberg has no such aspirations. When developing characters, she explained, at a reading at Cudd Hall, that she uses no methods.

> Instead, she said, "I use my eyes and ears, let them say what they have to say, and try not to block them." And when asked why she writes stories a certain way, Eisenberg smiles, looks up at the ceiling with her hands in the air and says, "I honestly have no idea. It just seemed right" (Douglass)

5.2.3 Summing up the "Modern" Grotesque

The grotesque is at the heart of contemporary debates and it finds its place as an integral part of the arts of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The very term is highly ambiguous and over the last two hundred years other terms appeared that carry some of the characteristics of the grotesque; the arabesque, abject, uncanny, bricolage, dystopia. Grotesque however, seems to be more inclusive than any of the terms mentioned above and unlike the traditional, classical considerations of it as material, fleshly, bodily, the modern grotesque has greater symbolical aspirations as Flannery O'Connor stressed. When a connection to contemporary American literature is made, the term's use gets rather complicated. There seems to be a trend in American literature, which asserts that the images of the grotesque, after the 1950s, have been born out of criminality and violence and are "monstrously graphic in the fiction writers like William Burroughs, Hubert Selby, Cormack McCarthy, Bret Easton Ellis and Chuck Palahniuk" (Goodwin, 175). James Goodwin feels that such monstrous images in contemporary American fiction are a consequence of the viciousness of the modern world; Hitler and the concentration camps, Hiroshima and Nagasaki etc. Further, he finds that the term, which best fits when talking about contemporary American writers implementing brutal and violent grotesque images, should be "the monstrous" and not the grotesque. Tower's stories do not follow this tradition Goodwin talks about, and they are not monstrous. Moreover, the gruesome images Tower employs in his stories are grotesque, but not fully in the Bakhtinian sense of the word. The power to provoke equalising laughter is lost. When it comes to Eisenberg's stories, they do not seem to be grotesque at all. Maybe the perverted and disgusting "symbolical" side of the grotesque is the affair in "The Flaw of the Design", but even there Eisenberg is not being judgemental. Moreover, even when violence exists, and the grotesque could be hypothetically used to the maximum, as in "Window", Eisenberg hesitates. Her stories are simply "grotesque free"? The beauty of her writing lies exactly in that; avoiding repugnance and abhorrence created through the perverted images of the body, defecation and distortion. Eisenberg has no intention of showing freaks, nor does she strive to make any symbolical statements by using them. That is not the scope of her writing. For the *Stranger*, she said:

I'm really interested in fiction. That seems to be what I aspire to. Why? I don't know. I really can't give you causes, but maybe I could churn up a few reasons as we're sitting here. One is that I think it's sort of infinitely flexible. You know, I'm an aesthete, the fact is. I like making something that's art. I do it with this incredibly, actually *inflexible* medium, you know—language. But, really I suppose you could say that I aspire to expressing sorts of feelings, of mental states or experiences that are just on the border of the expressible. Making something that is actually quite beautiful in a way—I mean, I'm not sure that anything I make is perceived as beautiful—but that's my deep drive, to make something that's quite beautiful. And also to make something that's extremely accurate to these very, very subtle states of mind. And I think that fiction has a capacity for truthfulness that, really, no other prose form has (Frizzelle).

6. Conclusion

> One of the chief problems with Bakhtin's theory is his tendency to absolutize the liberating potential of carnival and to insist that the reversal of social, ethnical, and behavioural norms is necessarily comic , results in a view of carnival that is too idealized, and a definition of the comic that is too undifferentiated, to be acceptable. Although reversals of the kind which Bakhtin links with carnival can be comic, they can equally well be experienced as horrifying or tragic (1).
>
> Adrian Stevens

The purpose of this dissertation was to inquire whether the application of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and its basic concepts is possible considering selected short stories by Wells Tower and Deborah Eisenberg. However, the goal was also to investigate to what extent these concepts are applicable concerning not only form (polyphonic structure, heteroglossic features, dialogism), but also the deeper meaningful characteristic of the carnival purpose itself as denoted by Bakhtin through the use of the grotesque, parody and laughter in American short stories. This work is mostly interested in the narrative and literary techniques that according to Bakhtin create a carnivalesque work. Therefore, more attention was paid to technical side of his theories and on the way Bakhtin's concepts help in the analysis of the short story genre but also in the liberated literature of today. The meaning behind the carnivalesque concept has however not been displaced, but perhaps not analyzed to a greater extent except in the contexts of the selected author's personal experiences and personal cultural, social and political orientations.

When it comes to the investigation of the polyphonic structure (including dialogic expectation) of the selected stories, it enabled an understanding of the extent of dialogization between mainly the author and the characters but also the author and the readers, and it also clarified whether such an "event" was achieved to a lesser or greater extent. This in turn also made the understanding of the position of the author, as a participant in the story, that more prominent. When the polyphonic aspect of Tower's short stories was considered, there proved to be some inconsistencies. For as long as in some stories a clear division between the narrator's voice and characters' voices is achieved, as in "Wild America" and to a lesser extent in "The Brown Coast", the narrator seems not to erect commentary or dialogize with the character in a true Bakhtinian sense. However,

considering the presence of irony in most of Tower's stories, it can be noted that polyphony is achieved. Firstly, Tower is being ironic in describing Bob's physical appearance and his misfortunes with this job, the loss of an inheritance and his wife. Secondly, a dose of irony can be sensed when describing Jacey's attitudes to her cousin Maya and the things young girls talk about nowadays or the way they behave. Thirdly, ironic insertions are recognizable in "On the Show", especially with the image of the father's distrustful behaviour towards his son who has just been molested by a carnie worker. The narrator, who is not a principal character in these stories, but rather an outside observer, although indiscreetly, by using somewhat unrecognizable irony, provides a commentary and dialogizes his/her opinion. In other stories, where the narrator is the protagonist of the story, things are to some extent different. In "Down Through the Valley", "Retreat" or the "Door in Your Eye", the characters narrating the story somehow seem too involved, not leaving a lot of space for other characters of the story to develop their voices. As shown, the only means of expression of the characters is either through the vague descriptions provided by the narrator or through dialogue. In dialogues the characters come to life, and it is through dialogues that the readers get a clearer picture about the other characters that have so far been only described by the narrator. Despite trying to present himself as an honest, regretful and sorrowful brother, Matthew is as unforgiving, envious and incapable of communicating with his brother Stephen as he was when they were children; the dialogues, the direct confrontations of the two brothers, not only expose Matthew's true nature, but they function as an important clarifying device on the nature of these two brothers' relationship. Matthew and Stephen are simply too resentful to each other and too unsympathetic towards each other's lifestyles for any kind of lasting relationship to be possible. In "Down Through the Valley", the focus is rather limited when it comes to narration. Basically, Ed is the focal point in the story and he is the one who seems to be in control of the narration. However, Ed tells much more about his true self in direct confrontation with his ex–wife's boyfriend Barry. The dialogues serve the purpose of revealing what Ed has had the purpose of hiding. Through dialogues, it becomes apparent that the relationship Ed has with his wife is far from being friendly, as he characterized it at the beginning of the story, and the whole situation of driving Barry to the city is excruciatingly unpleasant for Ed.

The possibilities of dialogization in Tower's stories are not many. The focus is mostly placed on one central figure and what matters is the character. The purpose is not to dialogize with the readers so much as it is to present these specific characters in all their shabbiness. However, the title story in the collection can be regarded as the most expressive of them all, and maybe the most dialogic of them all as well. "Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned" has voices of the past (the Vikings) dialogising with voices of the present by using contemporary American idiom. Clearly, the voice of the narrator is more prominent here as commentator on a certain political, social or other circumstance of the modern American world. Such an intervention on behalf of the author is probable, since Tower also admits he draws many of his stories from personal experience or on the basis of personal beliefs. Similarly, Deborah Eisenberg most directly implied her own voice in the first story of her latest collection, "Twilight of the Superheroes". It is not surprising that this story is the one with which the collection opens. It shapes the mood, the perspective and the focus of all the other stories in this collection, which appear to be extremely polyphonic in nature, unlike Tower's. Whether the narrator is an observer or the protagonist in the story, the possibilities of implementing other characters' speech are extensive. In "Like It or Not", the narrator observer, the one outside the story, does not influence its course. Naturally, the narrator allows for the development of the individual voice of Kate, by embedding it into narratorial speech (internal dialogues). Also, it allows for the implementation of other voices within narratorial discourses particularly the other voices of Kate (in the letter to Giovanna or to her ex–husband). The same goes for "Some Other, Better Otto", where Otto has a voice that is independent of the narrator's. Such a narrator observer is not biased however. The narrator in both stories is a commentator on both the main character's life and also on other characters that come into contact with them, but the narrator is always apparently on either Kate or Otto's side, at least it seems so.

Multivoicedness characterizes Eisenberg's stories and the call for readers to participate in the creation of the stories and dialogize with the characters is nowhere more obvious than in the "The Flaw in the Design" where the woman, whose name we do not know, seems to be addressing the readers in explaining her dull existence and the reasons behind her choices. She embodies however, not one, but two voices. The voice with which

she addresses the public which is honest and truthful, and the one she uses to address her family, a disguised, and falsely polite and pleasant one.

Considering other characteristics of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, it seems that Tower has encompassed them all. His characters talk in abusive language, the use insults as a mode of speech, and curses are an everyday occurrence. The language is freed of all norms and satisfies the carnivalesque nature of Bakhtinian discourse. The language is also ironic in some instances, when describing rough American characters or their relations to what matters most in their insignificant lives. Eisenberg writes in a significantly different language. It is soft, clear and precise. It does not include curse words, insults or any other form of abuse language can wield. Eisenberg wisely uses language to hint at things, and withholds information until the last moment possible. In "Window", there are many descriptions and language suggestions that imply violence and create suspense in the story. In "The Flaw in the Design", language is used in different ways, depending on the addressee. One language is more revealing, whereas the other is more concealing. Such use of language is not authoritative, but rather democratic, as it allows freedom of choice on behalf of the characters. According to Bakhtin, creative language use discovers and illumines the heteroglossic and polyphonic power of language. He stresses that:

> In the process of literary creation, languages interanimate each other and objectify precisely that side of one's own (and the other's) language that pertains to its world view, its inner form, the axiologically accentuated system inherent in it. For the creating literary consciousness, existing in a field illuminated by another's language, it is not the phonetic system of its own language that stands out, nor is it the distinctive features of its own morphology nor its own abstract lexicon — what stands out is precisely that which makes language concrete and which makes its world view ultimately untranslatable, that is, precisely the style of language as a totality ("Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse", 141).

Through the use of specific language, and by an active verbal interaction with others, true ideologies are unveiled and unmasked. Language, and its purposeful use, allow Tower and Eisenberg to either mask, or unmask their ideologies towards political, social or cultural affairs in their country. However, only Tower's language, the truly abusive and highly grotesque one seems to be carnivalesque in a Bakhtinian sense. Such language is liberated from social constraints and genteel literary conventions and is seen as a protest against that which is false and fake. Why pretend to use a language differently, like trying to make children be of outmost expressive power when that is not the case. Reality is again what

interests Tower the most. The language Eisenberg employs in her stories is Bakhtinian in the sense of creating polyphonic and heteroglossic structures within the story, but not carnivalesque.

When an up–close look is made to other features of the carnivalesque, like the grotesque images encompassing carnivalesque laughter and parody, some adjustment or approximation of the term to modern times has been necessary. Literary terms, in particular those concerning categories and modes of writing, seem to be in constant need of repair and renewal. These terms usually become overused; they tend to be applied more loosely and can be distorted by a variety of factors such as for example over–subjectivity on the part of the individuals who keep using them according to the particular tastes of a given historical era. The grotesque seems to have suffered even more than most from this inevitable variation, perhaps because the term has always been a dubious and extreme one; indeed, only recently has there been agreement on whether "the grotesque" is a valid and meaningful term at all. For Bakhtin, the hyperbolization of physical activities, physical details and other actions performed with and by the body, as well as the regenerative power of the cycle of life are considered to be among the basic features of the carnival spirit. The grotesque he described, seen as referring mainly to physical malformations provoking disgust, but regenerating and renewing causing laughter with positive expectations and outcomes, is an oversimplification of the term. The same goes for Kayser's negative, dark grotesque and the diabolic laughter associated with it. In this dissertation, the means by which grotesque effect is created have been analyzed in selected stories, not only in the light of Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque but considering some aspects of Kayser's definition as well. Tower uses the grotesque as a mode of writing to construct a thrillingly, violent, bleak and beautiful American Reality. Alex Shephard quotes Tower in an interview for an online review magazine *Full Stop:*

> I don't think many of us are really trying to do ill. And I think most of the ill that's done in the world happens despite our best notions of ourselves. And that's something that continues to interest me. It's much more interesting to me to have a character that's trying to be very, very good and doing a poor job at it than having someone who's a wife–beating asshole, or something like that (Shephard).

Flannery O'Connor, whom Tower greatly admires, described the subjects of her fiction as "Freaks and poor people, engaged always in some violent, destructive action" (Thompson, "Fellow Freaks"). She claimed that her vision of an American South full of distorted

bodies and maimed souls was not grotesque but realistic. “The poor love formality, I believe, even better than the wealthy,” she wrote, “but their manners and forms are always being interrupted by necessity. The mystery of existence is always showing through the texture of their ordinary lives, and I’m afraid that this makes them irresistible to the novelist” (Thompson, “Fellow Freaks”). Wells Tower demonstrates a similar affinity in *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*. Tower includes scenes of horrific molestation in “Wild America” and then in “On the Show”. He addresses carnie workers as people of perverted minds and distorted souls. Further, he makes Bob revolting by grotesquely describing the state of his house and the aquarium, specifically by relying on scents. Vividly, he compares a teenager’s sore on his lip with a burger and writes about the lingering torture of a pigeon in “Wild America”. Such grotesque cannot be seen as celebratory, but in some way as defying the normal and usual, it fulfils the role of regenerating and reaffirming through grotesque representations. Furthermore, Tower said that he cannot beautify or write about things in a nice way if they are not nice. As a realistic writer, Tower’s main objective is not to make things likeable to his readers, but believable and true in all their gruesomeness.

Eisenberg on the other hand had nothing grotesque to present. What her writing is all about is conveying specific feeling, attitudes and creating specific moods, as she herself admits. The only grotesque comes either through an act of violence in “Window”, but even then, this violence seems softened. The grotesque as metaphorical disgust, that we saw Tower implementing with the descriptions of molestations, can maybe show itself in “The Flaw of the Design” and the woman’s attitude towards her numerous affairs with random men, or in the reactions of her tormented son, but also in “Like It or Not” with the image of Henry spending the night with a teenage daughter of his rich friends. Repugnance is referred to in these acts, but the very image of the repugnant is not presented. It seems that Eisenberg rather avoids this grotesque by focusing on the way the characters handle situations that are of an unpleasant nature; more precisely the mood carried by these unpleasant situations. No matter how grotesque is presented, quite literally as in Tower’s stories or metaphorically, but to a lesser degree, in Eisenberg’s, it is a dark grotesque, a distortion meant to show the corruption or terror of life, the violent assault upon the reader’s sensibility. Since Bakhtin explained that grotesque images complement parody, parody has also been looked at, but from a different angle. The concept of parody used in

this dissertation is a somewhat loosely constructed term which represents merging of Bakhtin's theory of the parody with a postmodern, more suitable, type of parody as explained by Hutcheon. The goal was to show that the two concepts share similarities, yet Hutcheon's is closer to the era in which the works analyzed were created and has proved to be therefore more appropriate. This also showed that not just parody, but many other carnivalesque features, mainly concerning the meaning, creating realities, and images, like the grotesque, seem to have been in need of adjustment. Bakhktin's concepts were not forced onto the selected stories, but rather an inquiry was conducted to see whether their application is still valid in contemporary literature, more precisely in short stories in today's America. Both authors, Tower and Eisenberg, use parody either as a technique of imitation for the purpose of commenting, or for ironic inversions. Such a willingness to play with society's contradictions, where what is being valorised is also subverted at the same time, is an even–handed process because it ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge. Therefore, Tower and Eisenberg both somehow try to denaturalize some of the dominant features of our life; to present how those features we usually think of as natural (life circumstances of an individual, capitalism, war, liberal humanism) are in fact made by us and not given to us. Eisenberg's descriptions of the September 11 attacks are a sharp criticism of American politics and she presents its devastation in both a physical and psychological sense (minds of different people in the story), but the rest of the stories are overviews of passive and ignorant American citizens and the post September 11 mood that prevailed among them for a long time. The twilight her characters find themselves in is their own fault, which they realize, eventually. Tower's characters are somewhat paradoxical themselves. No matter how hard they try to make their lives right, something always goes wrong and spoils the intention. It seems that for both authors the future is not bright. Considering the titles of their collections what awaits is even more horrific than what has happened. Interestingly, both authors made a strong personal statement in their title stories. While Eisenberg opted for the beginning of the collection, Tower decided that in order to make a resounding effect he would place his title story at the end of the collection. The parody in "Everything Ravaged Everything Burned" lies in the very imitation of an already existing situation for the purpose of commenting. The Vikings, the modern Americans, are searching for pretexts for war and while there are many who feel

enthusiastic about this, Tower notes there are those (Harald) who realize how pointless such an attitude is, but who are, at the same time, too afraid to act differently so as not to be marginalised by the larger community. Such an attitude is not unfamiliar for Americans. The state of mind of contemporary Americans is in a type of twilight, a Kafkaesque atmosphere of some sort, and for as long as they consider themselves as superheroes, everything will be ravaged and everything will be burned.

Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesqe, underpinning concepts of polyphony, heteroglossia, the grotesque, parody and laughter, proved an important tool in analyzing these short stories. However, some revalorization of his concepts was necessary when looking at particular authors and their particular work. In "The Carnivalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Pop Culture and the Erotic", Linda Hutcheon explains that although some Bakhtinian concepts seem not be applicable to contemporary world (at least in the way he described them), she feels that contemporary literature stresses the polyphonic and dialogic nature of discourse more than Dostoevsky's work ever did (83). The reason might be that today's world has become more open and its population more diverse than the one Bakhitn referred to. In many of his works Bakhtin suggested that when societies close down upon themselves that there is little hope for injecting new ideas, methods of speaking, diverse perspectives and so forth; they become monologic. This makes sense considering the political background of the time Bakhtin lived in and in which he wrote. If contemporary literature is dialogic as Hutcheon pointed out, and the carnivalesque is seen as a possible and probable outcome, then the question that should always be asked in analyzing a work according to Bakhtin's principle of the carnivalesque should be; against what are ordinary folk protesting in the contemporary world? The carnivalesque is not simple toleration, it is a boiling cauldron of potential creativity which may either harm or nourish, but it will certainly never wear off. Writers of short stories in America, and in this case Eisenberg and Tower, insert a plethora of characters in their stories, giving them a prevailing mood that makes up carnivalesque atmosphere of protest of some sort. Eisenberg is protesting against American foreign policy, the war in Iraq, corporate greed and exploitation. The stories in *Twilight of the Superheroes* force an unwelcoming recognition of the part America plays in the world, and the accent is put on the mood of guilt and dread that haunts these people as they come to self–examinate the value of their lives. As for Tower, his characters do not feel any guilt, nor do they

experience any self doubt. What Tower seems to be “protesting” against is the very unawareness of people about themselves, their weirdness and their pretentious natures. It seems as though they are so blinded that rational thinking becomes an annoyance which they are ready to discard as soon as things get rough (that is also one of the reasons why we have less information about the characters, for they simply do not share with the narrator), and turn to violence, the lowest of all modes of human behaviour.

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